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**The Keys To
Queenscourt**
by Jeanne Hines



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a talented storyteller."

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Mistress of Terror

Diane Forrest came as the bride of a man she barely knew to the fabulous mansion of Queenscourt. Industrial tycoon Duke Tarrant had swept her off her feet and wed her with the same burning passion and iron will that had broken down every barrier on his path to success.

Only at Queenscourt did Diane begin to learn the truth about this man she desperately loved, and this place she feared more with every passing night. She was not the first woman in Duke Tarrant's life, and the others had died suddenly, mysteriously, hideously. And she was not the first woman to be mistress of this great house. Another had ruled here before Diane... a heavenly beautiful, demonically possessed woman whom the world said was dead... a woman whose spirit Diane alone knew was alive, and seeking a vengeance straight from hell itself...

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P O P U L A R  L I B R A R Y

LITHO IN U.S.A.

No Defense

Lorna

lay in the grave, her mangled body mercifully covered by the earth, but her evil still ruled this house that had been her wedding gift to her husband, and now was her trap for any woman who dared to take her place.

Francine

was very much alive, an aristocratic beauty whose charms and wealth had always gotten her anything and every man she had ever desired, and now she wanted Duke Tarrant, no matter what price she had to pay, no matter whom she had to destroy.

Diane knew that neither of these women would rest until she was out of the way . . . that no moment of the day or night was safe as long as she remained at Queenscourt . . . that the only question was, who would strike first, the living or the dead . . . ?

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and a joy to read."

—*The Georgetowner*

The Keys To Queenscourt

by Jeanne Hines

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*In memory of my father,
Llewellyn Brown McNeill,
who would have loved this book*

All the characters and events in this book are fictitious and any resemblance to incidents or persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental.

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Chapter 1

Nothing in Diane Forrest's background had prepared her for Queenscourt.

Back home in the Piedmont country of Virginia when someone had died they had been interred in the prim local cemetery and had remained there. Without comment. There had been to her knowledge, among her friends and neighbors, nothing that had gone bump in the night that had not had some perfectly rational—usually dull—practical explanation. Her knowledge of high finance was non-existent, of corporate conniving sketchy, of the racy suburban life of wealthy country club sets she knew little.

She was in short totally unprepared for Queenscourt.

Just as she had been breathlessly unprepared for the sudden high pressure courtship of Duke Tarrant—the man they called The Duke.

She saw him first in Nassau silhouetted against the sky, a dominating solitary figure, at the top of the Queen's Staircase. She had flown to the Bahamas from Miami on a package tour—her last fling with the last of the money—and her sightseeing had led her to that landmark of Old Nassau with its 66 limestone steps. Climbing up she had paused for breath and looked up, blinking into the brilliant sun, and there he was above her. The sun had glinted on his shoulders for a moment like armor and his eyes were visored, shut. He had seemed to bear down on her like a tall Knight Templar sweeping forward and she had stepped aside instinctively before that irresistible advance.

She turned and watched his arrogant back disappear down the flight of stone steps and thought, amused, *If not a King, at least a Duke . . . How lucky the Duchess must be!* And wondered idly who he was.

She saw him next across the crowded Casino at Paradise Island, where she had gone with some new-found friends from the cruise ship docked in the harbor, reaching it via free bus over the fantastic star-reaching span of the Paradise Island Bridge that shot up out of Nassau into the sky like a giant roller coaster and zoomed down again into the lush tropical paradise that housed one of the largest casinos of the Western World. She was still remembering, with a caught breath, the breathtaking sight as she had looked down from the pinnacle of that bridge onto the deck of a great white ship moving gracefully through the blue water below her, when someone said, "Who's the high roller?"

And someone else said, "Don't you know? That's Duke Tarrant, the steel magnate." And Diane looked at the hawk-faced man with the sardonic mouth surrounded by a little knot of people at one of the crap tables and realized it was the man from the Queen's Staircase. *At least a Duke*, she thought wryly. *Well, I wasn't far wrong!*

As they pushed closer, she could see his eyes. Steely blue and cold, like the glint of frost on snow. Gray wings to his dark hair. A hawk face and a sardonic mouth. Diane had never seen such a strangely arresting face.

"The Duke himself, eh?" murmured a man beside her. "That's a looker with him."

The woman was certainly a looker. She appeared at this distance to be made entirely of gold. Her hair gleamed like molten metal, her skin was golden with tan, her skin-tight dress was golden too so that her handsome figure seemed gilded—and naked. Fit companion for the tall arrogant man at her side, thought Diane with a sudden pang, and watched as the croupier pushed a pile of chips toward The Duke and the girl reached out a lazy golden arm and took a handful. The Duke made no move to stop her. Plainly she had rights.

"He's dangerous looking, isn't he?" commented Moira, one of her new-found friends, met when they had both pounced on the same purse at the Straw Market. "The kind who would bend a woman to his will?" She laughed. "Doubt if he'll bend that witch beside him—more likely the other way around!"

Duke Tarrant . . . the Steel Duke. The man who had created an empire out of Tarrant Steel, whose head-on col-

lisions with the government were famous and great newspaper copy. So this was what he looked like. . . .

"This place is lousy with celebrities," said Moira. "Look over there, I think I see a couple of movie stars!"

"Yes," said Diane, her gaze never leaving the tall lean man whose cold blue eyes rested on the table for a moment before he threw out the dice. A cheer went up, and another pile of chips was pushed toward him.

The golden girl helped herself to another handful.

"Some girls have all the luck," sighed Moira.

"Do they?" asked Diane, half-musing. What would it be like, she asked herself, to be loved by a man like that? A man who knocked the world into line when it didn't please him. . . . How did he treat the women in his life? And that one with him, did she count? Was she a weekend wonder who came with the islands or did she have some deeper tie?

"Come on, let's play the one-arm bandits!" Moira dragged her to the slot machines, through the well dressed crowd milling around the tables. Beside her a strong French accent called "Banquo!" and a woman laughed shrilly. Someone else cursed. She felt the excitement of it. Win or lose, there was drama in the air.

"Gee, I wish I was staying." Moira stuffed money into the nearest machine. "Or that you were going on the boat with me, Diane." Moira was taking a cruise that had a one-day stop in Nassau, while Diane had flown in and was spending a week here. Moira had a good job in New York and often took cruises. Diane thought about the job of a very junior assistant in the research department of a giant firm that she was going back to, starting a week from today, and wondered if she'd be able to save up enough to take a cruise back here next year. Probably not.

"This is sure great honeymoon country," sighed Moira. "I'll bet half these people here are just married!"

Diane laughed. "I doubt it—at least not to each other. But I agree, it has all the right atmosphere." But The Duke wasn't just married, she thought. He didn't *look* married.

"All those overheated palm trees and that romantic beach," Moira rattled on. "Wouldn't you just love to take a swim in the altogether on that beach?"

Diane gazed at her, amused. She had never taken a swim in the "altogether." Back home in the Piedmont country of

Virginia it wasn't done by well-bred little girls and she had been nothing if not well bred. Girls'-school educated, bright prospects. Until a jet went down on its way back from Europe with both her parents aboard. It was a foreign plane on an international run, so the insurance wasn't much. And her father had had a high income but not much capital. So there had been enough money to put her through college and a little left over—enough for this splashy trip. After which she would become a wage slave, strictly on her own.

"Hey, wake up." Moira nudged her. "My glamorous one-day stint in Nassau is about over. I've got to catch the boat at midnight. Come and see me off? And maybe stow away?"

Diane laughed. "I'll go as far as the dockside with you, but I won't promise to stow away!"

She was still thinking of The Duke as her new-found friend bade her a gay good-by and scampered onto the launch. She stood there with the wind whipping her light dress, watching the bright lights of the lovely white ship, listening to the music that drifted out over the water, and behind her, back toward the swaying palms.

"Sail on," she said aloud to the departing ship. "And maybe next year I'll sail with you!" With some glamorous man like . . . The Duke. She told herself she was being a fool and made her way back to her handsome hotel in its setting of palms. His face still haunted her, as she opened the window and stared out into the balmy night air, across the sea's cold glitter. She had trouble sleeping that night.

Next day she went shopping in the town, crossing the tall sky-spanning bridge and finding her way delightedly through piles of conch shells, gleaming salad bowls of Honduras mahogany, cleverly woven straw hats and fans and purses, little shops with French perfumes, Scotch liquor, and English leather where the shopkeepers battled it out in happy jousting for the franc, the pound sterling, the mark, the peso, the yen, and—most numerous—the Yankee dollar.

Trundling home with her purchases at dusk, she waved wildly but missed the free bus, and turned forlornly, wondering when the next one would be along.

And she saw Duke Tarrant, striding along, glaring in the direction of the departing bus. He stopped and looked around him, hardly glancing in her direction. She wished she had worn something more spectacular than her crumpled cocoa-

brown linen pants suit. Her newly-purchased floppy straw hat was a little too large and slipped down to rest irritatingly on her big sun glasses, and her hair, comfortably pushed up under it, gave little hint of its sun-bleached taffy sheen. She felt hot and sticky and tired—and knew she looked it.

It took her a minute before she realized Duke was speaking to her.

"Well, come on, if you're going to the Island," he said impatiently. "Jump aboard the launch. There may not be another bus for hours. Take what's offered!"

She realized then that people were boarding a dilapidated motor launch and remembered belatedly that both boats and buses to the Casino were free. He reached out a hand and practically pulled her aboard the launch and she was furious that she should find his touch electric.

He sat down beside her.

"I'd have thought you'd have taken a taxi," she observed, "after all the money I saw you win last night."

"Then you didn't stay long enough," he said grimly. "I lost it all back and then some. And today, to cap it all, I had my wallet lifted in the town!"

"So you're broke as the rest of us?"

"And dependent on free transportation to get me back to my hotel where I can cash a check."

"Right now, if I cashed a check," said Diane lightly, "it would be returned for insufficient funds!"

"There's water coming in over my feet!" shrieked a fat woman, leaping up and spilling a pile of bundles.

Diane jerked alert. The overcrowded launch was now in the middle of the bay.

"Don't mind her," said Duke. "These tubs are always awash. It's a short run."

Beside the fat woman a thin hysterical one had risen with a shrill scream, "We're sinking! We're sinking!"

Two big men, who had had a few too many cocktails in the town, rocked to their feet and staggered as both fat and thin women plummeted into them. One let out a yell of pain and fell over the railing.

"Man overboard!" howled his drunken friend and the entire complement of passengers fell over each other in a mad rush to that side of the boat.

There was a yell from the captain.

"They're overbalancing the damn tub!" roared Duke, and amid a torrent of screams the boat tipped dangerously, Diane grabbed her shopping bag, the boat capsized and she saw Duke hit his head on the railing as she felt herself plummet into the water. Her sun glasses came off as she surfaced and she could see her hat floating away, and saw Duke, knocked out, sinking under the water beside her.

Diane was a good swimmer. She let go of the shopping bag—it was a wrench; she had spent all her spare cash to-day—and grabbed Duke by the hair, pulling his head above the water. She was treading water and shouting for help—which was not forthcoming from any of the large spluttering men floundering in the water near her, nor from the screaming women, several of whom couldn't swim but were hanging onto the side of the half-submerged craft.

After what could have been only minutes but seemed like several days, another launch came up and they were pulled unceremoniously aboard.

"Dead?" inquired a jocular fellow as Diane climbed up beside Duke's recumbent form.

"Only sleeping," she said grimly, and Duke opened his eyes.

"What the hell—!" he began and sat up, holding his head.

"We capsized. You hit your head. I pulled you out," she explained tersely.

"Why?" he asked curiously. "Why didn't you just swim around like the others, intent on your own affairs, and let me drown?"

"That's a strange question," she said, annoyed. "You might at least thank me!"

"That's right, I might." He studied her face. "That conk on the head has given me a violent headache," he said, "that only Scotch and a good woman can cure. Care to join me for dinner?"

"I'm not sure I'm 'good' in just the sense you mean," she said carefully.

He laughed. "I promise to do nothing to offend you. Suppose you weren't around the next time my life needs saving?"

Of course, that was it . . . gratitude. She felt strangely deflated. And rebuffed.

Her eyes glinted. "You do owe me something. My shop-

ping bag was going down for the third time and so were you. It was a hard choice."

"I'll make that up to you," he said. "Tell me where you're staying and as soon as I'm in funds again, I'll be right over."

"That girl I saw you with last night, won't she mind?"

"Gloria?" So that was the golden one's name. He shrugged. "No matter. I'll give her a pile of chips and she'll be off on the scent of the gold!"

She grinned at that. That was her opinion of Gloria too.

She dressed for dinner with special care, in a narrow taffy-colored raw silk that matched the darker parts of her sun-bleached taffy hair, considered her smooth golden tan and wide clear blue eyes in the mirror, and decided she had done what she could.

The Duke's eyes narrowed as he took in the lines of her small-boned attractive figure, the lift of her chin, the clear eyes that looked steadily into his, the gleam of her taffy-gold hair.

"Well, well," he said approvingly. "This is quite a change. I start out with a drowned mouse and end up with a raving beauty! You look better dry than wet."

She laughed, her self-confidence soaring. "That's not surprising. So do you!"

He took her arm in a proprietary way. "Did you know that in some parts of the world, when you save someone's life they belong to you for keeps?"

She felt her breath come a little quicker. "And are we in such a part of the world?"

"Let's find out." He smiled. "Let's go out and learn the local customs, shall we?"

It was a night she would always remember. Star-studded, filled with laughter and excitement, with a big unreal moon looking down. Whirling in The Duke's arms around a dozen dance floors to pulsing music, touching her sparkling champagne glass to his in a dozen merry toasts. When she got home she realized that, caught by his magnetism, she had told him all about herself. And he had told her nothing. But those steely blue eyes had considered her thoughtfully. A weighing look.

Somehow that week, The Duke became a habit. Gloria melted out of his life on a sea of chips, and it was breakfast, lunch and dinner with The Duke. He took her sightseeing to

the old forts: Fort Charlotte, Fort Fincastle, Fort Montague. And as naturally as breathing, he kissed her at the top of the Queen's Staircase and she thought for a heartstopping moment, *If he were only my own, my very own. . . .*

That evening, her last evening in Nassau, she had dinner with him on the terrace of his hotel suite and looked out over the bougainvillea vines, with their sweet scent, to a white cruise ship in the harbor. "Aren't the lights beautiful?" she said dreamily.

"She's sailing tomorrow night. Want to go along?" Duke was in a gay mood, exuberant.

She gasped. "But I'm flying north tomorrow. You don't mean, sail away just like that?"

"Just like that." He picked her up and held her high over the railing so that she looked down and felt a moment of fright.

But next day her week was over and she was packing to go home. To a shattered world without him. She found herself crying as she packed the gay souvenirs he had bought her.

Duke hadn't called all morning. She had called his room twice but he was out. She waited as long as she dared and then took the long taxi ride to the airport, feeling as dejected as if she had been left stranded at the altar.

She was a fool for feeling that way, she told herself. He had been grateful that she had saved his life, and had romanced her for a week as a reward. It would be something to look back on, winter evenings, and remember. She trudged through the airport blindly.

"What the hell are you doing here? Running away?" said a familiar voice, and she turned to see through her tears Duke's sun-browned face glaring down at her.

"No, I'm—my plane leaves in ten minutes," she said. "My luggage is already aboard."

"Why, Diane?"

"I have a job, Duke. I can't stay here. I—"

"You mean back in Virginia they'd call you a fallen woman if you just moved in with me?" he asked, amused. "You're opting for wedding bells?"

She flushed.

"Diane, don't you know a proposal from a proposition?" he said, taking her hand. "I went under for the third time last night."

"I didn't think you meant it," she said breathlessly. "I thought—"

"That I'd let you drift quietly out of my life? Oh, no. Stay and marry me, Diane. And we'll sail the Out Islands together."

She didn't care that people were staring. She didn't care if the whole world heard. She flung herself into his arms and then jerked back. "My luggage!" she cried. "My luggage is on that plane! And there it goes!" With a roar the jet—and her luggage—took off into the sky.

"We'll have it sent back," said Duke airily. "Meantime you'll need a trousseau. Think we can round up one this afternoon? We're sailing tonight and the Captain will marry us once we're in international waters."

For a moment she couldn't speak. She wanted to laugh and cry. She had thought she had lost him and now, and now. . . .

"I don't care if I'm married in a bedsheet!" she cried, and then blushed brilliant red because several people burst out laughing.

Her hastily bought trousseau was acquired in downtown Nassau—as was her chunky diamond ring—and she was swiftly aware that The Duke bought with a lavish hand. She had never hoped to afford such clothes. *Rags to riches*, she thought joyously. *And Duke too!*

That night, when the white ship sailed, they sailed with her. And were married at midnight in the huge dining salon, where a full orchestra beat out, "Here comes the bride!" Duke bought champagne all around and the passengers cheered.

They left the ship at the next port because Diane expressed a lazy wish to stay at a pink hotel perched high on a cliff. And chartered a boat to Eleuthera with its pink beaches and towering cliffs that looked down sheer-faced, and then wandered through the "Out Islands" of the Bahamas under sail, touching at places with wonderful names like Cutlass Bay, Cat Island, Hard Bargain, Deadman's Cay. . . . They bone fished and scuba dived and made love on lonely pink beaches with only the sand and the sea and the screaming gulls. It had begun on Paradise Island and it was paradise all the way.

And one day they nipped back into Nassau and Duke took her to his broker's office, and when she came out she had the

dizzy understanding that 40,000 shares of Tarrant Steel common stock had been transferred to her name.

"You're a rich woman in your own right," Duke told her. "I couldn't have people thinking you married me for my money." His caressing smile took any sting out of that.

"I don't need money," said Diane with a steady look. "I only need you."

His voice was husky as he pulled her to him. "I never knew the likes of you, Diane," he muttered against her taffy-gold hair.

Please God, she thought. Let him love me as much as I love him.

They stayed a week in Nassau, and every day Duke called his broker and was very thoughtful after he hung up the phone. She supposed it was because the market was falling.

He studied the newspaper a lot these days too, the stock market section, and drummed his nails and stared out through the plate glass windows into the hard blue sky at nothing. She felt she had somehow failed him, but she didn't know how.

One afternoon, after a call to his broker, he brooded through the afternoon and then picked up the newspaper and slammed it down. "Diane," he said, "get dressed. "We're doing the town tonight." There was something young and excited and reckless about him tonight, she thought. Like a French aristocrat going to the guillotine during The Terror. She didn't know just why that thought occurred to her.

They made a whirlwind tour of the clubs and stopped for dinner at a place Duke liked. It looked like a rakish version of a Moorish palace, with rough plastered walls and arches and golden lights set into heavy ironwork. They ordered conch salad spiked with hot peppers and lemon juice. From outside, the music of goatskin drums, maracas and saws scraped with nails drifted in.

"It's Goombay Summer," he told her, lifting his glass.

She smiled, seeing that whatever had been bothering him was plainly over. "And what's Goombay Summer?" she asked.

"It's a festival, with a parade of jump-in dancers. There'll be dancing in the streets tonight."

She lifted a bite of her conch salad and across Duke's

broad shoulder she saw a man and a woman walk into the room.

The woman, she thought idly, had an electric quality to her. She was slender and vivid and tense. Her dress was a slice of melon against the rough plaster of the walls. Her red hair was combed dramatically to the side. She strolled into the room looking about her and suddenly her eyes fastened on Duke, grew incredulous. Catlike, she walked around until she could see his profile.

Then, "Duke Tarrant!" her voice rang out. "I wouldn't have believed we'd run into you here."

Duke's head spun around to face her.

"Kitty," he said. "Todd. What brings you to Nassau?"

"We just flew over from Miami for a spot of gambling," said the man called Todd, a tanned gray-haired man with a firm expression and a slight limp. His glance at Diane was openly curious.

Urbane as always, Duke introduced them. These were the Feverells, Kitty and Todd. His wife, Diane.

"I can't believe it," gasped Kitty Feverell. "The Duke has taken a wife! And what a beauty! Let me look at you."

Diane felt awkward under this bright inspection. She was glad she had worn the handsome long white silk Duke had bought for her on their wedding day. It looked sophisticated and right in this setting.

Duke said, "Won't you join us? We can recommend the grouper."

And Kitty Feverell said, Indeed they would, and tell us all about it. When did it happen? And how? And don't leave anything out, everyone in the County will want to know!

Duke grimaced and said there was very little to tell, they'd been married such a short time, Diane had come down here on vacation. His tone implied that was that.

On vacation? Kitty pounced on that. Where was she from? Her accent—

Virginia, admitted Diane. Yes, her first trip down. Oh, yes, she loved the islands. She was about to launch into a description of their hotel when Duke said smoothly, "We've taken a little place with a private beach not terribly far from here—" he gestured vaguely—"but the road is terrible."

"Oh?" echoed Kitty Feverell, as if that were very instruc-

tive. "So the road is terrible? That's too bad. I suppose a taxi would never make it?"

"It's a honeymoon cottage," smiled Duke, and Diane wondered that he could lie so smoothly. "You understand?"

"Oh, yes," murmured Kitty. "I certainly do understand." She rose. "Well, I must go freshen my face and I'm going to take this delightful child with me. We have women talk to hash over. Come along, Diane. That's your name, isn't it? Such a pretty inoffensive little name." She had grasped Diane's arm and was herding her toward the ladies' room, chattering all the way. How did she really *like* Nassau? Did they spend much time in the Casino? Duke was thinner; did Diane think he was too thin? How on earth had Duke allowed himself to lose touch like this? Why, no one in the County had any idea where to get in touch with him! And what golden luck, to run into them like this!

When they got back to the table, Duke had taken Todd away to show him the bar. They could see the two men walking slowly back toward their table.

"I'm sure your plans are still tentative, being so newly married," said Kitty Feverell, leaning forward, her eyes suddenly very bright, "but everyone in the County will want to know. Tell me, do you plan to live at Queenscourt?"

"Queenscourt?" Diane floundered. This was getting beyond her depth.

"Don't tell me Duke hasn't told you about Queenscourt? It's his home!"

Diane didn't like to admit he'd never mentioned it, so she hedged. "Oh, we probably will. Later," she evaded.

Kitty Feverell's mocking eyes held hers. "You want to bet?" she challenged.

Duke's voice broke in suddenly behind them. "What are you telling my bride, Kitty?" He didn't sound amused.

"Tales out of school, Duke." She turned to face him, her eyes copper bright. "About the old days."

"I prefer to tell Diane about the old days myself," said Duke silkily.

"Then you tell me, Duke, since Diane obviously doesn't know. Will you and Diane be coming back to live at Queenscourt?"

Did she imagine it, or did Duke's knuckles whiten as they clenched his glass? His voice was relaxed enough. "I doubt it.

Who knows? We might settle on one of the Out Islands and never go home."

"The Out Islands? So out of touch?" Kitty's voice had a taunting quality to it. "But really you should come back for a while at least. Show her your background, Duke, before you hide her away forever on some forgotten cay. And anyway all the old crowd will be dying to see your new bride. Isn't that so, Todd?"

Todd muttered something that sounded like agreement.

Kitty's bright eyes turned on Diane again. "And aren't you really curious to see that great Gothic pile of a house? After all, one day they'll tear it down to build a new road or a subdivision or something, and then you'll have missed it. I wouldn't dream of that, if I were you!"

"Let me recommend the jonnycake and Guava Duff," said Duke imperturbably. "Out Island specialties."

"Oh, yes," murmured Kitty. "And Out Island specialties are your thing this season, aren't they?" Her eyes lingered on Diane, who flushed.

Todd broke in with some small talk that relieved the tension and they ploughed through a meal that was full of undercurrents and innuendoes. Diane felt like a sailboat bobbing about on an angry sea under a cloudless sky. The weather was fair but an underground volcano seemed to be boiling up beneath her.

They finished their champagne and went on to the Casino, where she saw Gloria, the golden girl, give Duke a black look as she passed on the arm of a distinguished looking old gentleman with a cane. Duke nodded urbanely. Nothing could shake him, Diane thought proudly. But there was something here. Something the Feverells had brought down with them. The remnants of an old trouble.

"You should enjoy sailing the Out Islands with Duke," observed Kitty. "Duke's a great sailor. You used to keep a yacht anchored in Miami for vacations, didn't you, Duke? I can't remember, what was she called?"

Duke turned to consider Kitty. "She was called the 'Lorna,'" he said. "And she sank off Trinidad."

"Oh, yes, that's right, she sank..." murmured Kitty. "Funny, I didn't remember she was named 'Lorna.' I thought she was named 'Francie.'"

Todd's shoulders rippled; he looked upset, but Kitty charged right on. "You remember Francie, Duke?"

His gaze was steady but his voice was remote. "I remember Francie. Haven't heard from her lately. How is she?"

"Todd saw her." She gave Duke an amused look and Diane felt her unease deepen. "You remember she married her doctor after the accident, the one who pulled her through it in New York—none of us ever met him, she never brought him home to MacQueensport. Well, Todd ran across her in New York when he went up there for a stockholders' meeting and he said she looked wonderful and was getting a divorce." She watched him brightly.

"I'm sorry to hear that." Duke frowned. "So her doctor didn't work out. . . ."

"Oh, well, you know Francie." Kitty shrugged.

Diane thought Duke's face looked very set. He glanced at his watch. "I didn't realize it was so late. We have a big day ahead of us tomorrow. Sorry we can't stay longer." Abruptly he gathered in his chips. "Nice to see you both. Give our regards to everyone back in Ohio. Too bad we don't have a phone at the cottage."

"Well, give us a ring at our hotel. It's that pretty one on Shipwreck Beach. You know the place?"

"I know it." Duke smiled, shaking hands with Todd.

He'll never call you, thought Diane. I can tell it from his face.

They were very silent as the taxi took them back to their hotel. No dancing in the streets for them. Diane wanted to ask questions. About Lorna. About Francie. About Queenscourt. But something in his face forbade it.

But once the door was closed behind them, the world locked out, she sat down on the big bed and turned to Duke. "Kitty wondered if—"

He closed her mouth gently with two fingers, kissed her lightly. "Never ask. . . ." he murmured. "Especially anything Kitty might want to know."

She turned a questioning smile toward him, then lost herself in his kiss. Kitty, the world, slipped away . . . far away. She told herself she'd never ask him anything. Whatever he was hiding could remain hidden. Here in this bright windswept world nothing could ever reach them.

It only took a day to learn how wrong she was. . . .

Chapter 2

Next day when she woke, Duke was on the phone. His words snapped her awake.

"O. K., why don't you fly down? See you this afternoon."

He hung up.

"Who's flying down?" asked Diane.

"Friend of mine in Ohio. Name of Cobham." He drummed his fingers. "Diane, there are a couple of things you don't know about me. I was married once before. To Lorna MacQueen."

At this revelation, Diane sat up in bed.

"She died two years ago," he said. "We lived at her place—Queenscourt. It's mine now. That's what Kitty was talking about."

She waited, but he seemed to think he had said everything.

Cobham arrived on an afternoon plane. They met him at the airport. Cobham and Duke greeted each other like old friends. Duke called him "Cobbie" and proudly introduced Diane.

Cobham held out a steady hand and beamed at her. He was about sixty, she guessed, but though his skin was weatherbeaten, his hair was still quite dark. He was tall and just a little paunchy, but his rollicking expression and penetrating gray eyes made him seem younger than his years.

"You're a lucky man," he told Duke sincerely and Diane held herself a little straighter.

"How are things, Cobbie?" asked Duke. "I haven't liked the reports. Nor the market action. Tarrant Steel is taking a beating. The question is, why?"

"That's what I came down to talk to you about," said Cobham. His voice grew drier. "I came to convey an offer to buy a big bloc of your stock."

"Oh?" Duke sounded amused. "Cole send you? He always said someday he might buy me out."

The shadow of a frown passed over Cobham's face. "No, not Cole. I was trying to trace you when you called me. I'm conveying an offer from a group of men I hardly know."

Duke frowned. "Why you?"

"They thought I could talk to you. Better than they could. You mean to stay down here in the Islands now that you've taken a wife?"

Duke nodded.

"Then why not get out while you can?" asked Cobham bluntly. "There's a clique that's out to wreck Tarrant Steel; you may end up holding the short end of the stick. Why not cut and run?"

Duke stiffened.

Cobham sighed. "I was afraid of that," he said. "Pride. All that nonsense."

"Well, what's Banning doing about it?" demanded Duke. "He's president of the company, not me."

"Chester Banning married the little Larson girl right after you left," said Cobbie heavily.

"Oh. That one."

"That one." Cobbie sighed. "And she's been leading him a chase. She's left him three times. He's had private detectives following her. It's reached the point he can't concentrate on anything—doesn't know what might be going on at home."

"Too bad. He was a good man. Do you think he can tame her?"

"I doubt it," said Cobbie. "Maybe age will do it, but Banning will have succumbed long before that."

Duke drummed his fingers. "These men who sent you, who are they?"

"Straw men, I think," said Cobbie bluntly. "I think they're representing someone else, but I don't know who."

"We'll talk about it later," said Duke. "Have you eaten?"

"On the plane," said Cobbie. "I could use a drink."

"Right you are. So could I." They made small talk in the taxi as they went into the town and stopped in a bar. Duke found a quiet table, secluded from the rest by a bit of lattice-work, and turned to Diane. "You'll have time for some shopping while we talk business. Why don't you meet us back here in, say, an hour?"

It had the force of a command. Diane went.

And realized before she had gone a block that she'd forgotten her billfold. She retraced her steps to the bar and made her way between the tables to the quiet sheltered corner Duke had selected. She could see their heads bent over their glasses; she was shielded from their view by a lattice but their voices came to her clearly.

"...do about it?" That was Cobham.

"Nothing. Yet." That was Duke. She hesitated to interrupt.

"Duke, there isn't much time. The company's being milked. I can't really prove anything, but the word is out. And if something isn't done, if some change isn't made in the management at the next stockholders' meeting—" There was a shrug in his voice that said, *Then the game is up*. He paused, then coughed. "I know I've no right to bring this up, but this young wife of yours, does she know about—?"

"No."

Diane stiffened. What didn't she know?

"Well, no matter. I've seen this girl and there's a *strength* in her, Duke. I think she could rise to the occasion, if necessary."

Diane frowned. What on earth was he talking about?

"Mountains are worn away just by little raindrops," said Duke wearily. "If we go back, it will happen to us."

"Not necessarily. You could come back, take over control—it won't be easy, but you could do it—straighten things out, get the new management headed in the right direction, and come back here with your bride."

"If I go back," said Duke, "it will all begin again. All over again."

"Of course, the decision is yours," said Cobham. "As I told you, I bring you this offer. My best advice is not to take it, but to get yourself back there and fast, straighten matters out. You can do it, Duke, you've still got friends there."

"And enemies." His tone was bitter.

"We all have enemies," said Cobham.

"Mine are enthusiastic."

"Well, then about this offer—"

Diane fled. Soundlessly. She didn't want to hear about the offer; it concerned business and that was Duke's affair. But Duke's enemies—they were her enemies too. Until death did them part.

She prowled the stores, hardly seeing the merchandise. Duke was in trouble. Not only business trouble, but something else . . . something that cut deeper. And what that trouble was, she could not guess. But . . . he had been married before, to someone named Lorna MacQueen. She remembered the taunting look in Kitty Feverell's eyes when she had mentioned Queenscourt. Could the trouble have something to do with Duke's dead wife?

She shivered in the hot sun.

Had Duke loved Lorna so much that he had run all the way to the Islands to escape her memory? And—horrible thought!—*Did he marry me because I remind him of her?*

She turned blindly and barged into someone. "I'm sorry," she said in a muffled voice. "Could you tell me the time? I can't see the hands of my watch."

But her face was bland again when she joined them. She kept it that way, through the small talk during dinner, and after, when she went to bed early while the men sat and talked on the terrace.

Duke made his announcement at breakfast. She had, she knew, been expecting it.

"I have business in Ohio," he told her. "Have to go back for a while."

Cobham nodded, gravely pleased. "You've made the right decision."

Duke's eyebrows lifted wryly. "Perhaps. I just couldn't find an alternative."

Cobham turned to Diane. "You'll like Collins County," he told her smoothly. "Attractive country, nice people. Your husband's well known there."

Across the table Duke shot him a derisive glance.

"I'm sure I'll like it as much as Duke does," said Diane steadily.

"Spoken like a true wife," Duke approved, with a grin at Cobham. "And now, would you like to make the trek back to Virginia, see all your old friends, stay with them for a while, before you bury yourself in the wilds of Ohio?"

"You mean alone?"

"I'll be very busy," he warned. "Won't have much time for you."

She thought about that. The little town in the Piedmont country seemed very far away. Her school friends were scat-

tered and gone and there were only aching memories of the parents she had loved and interred there. Her life was with Duke now.

"I belong with you," she said quietly. "Where you are."

"I'll take the first flight back, but I've left my car stashed in Miami and I'll need it in Ohio. Cobbie, why don't you and Diane fly to Miami and pick up my car and drive back? You could take turns driving."

"At my age," said Cobham dryly, "I don't trust anyone else behind the wheel. Even a girl as lovely as Diane."

Duke grinned. "Then *you* drive. Bring Diane home safe to MacQueensport."

So it was a fact accomplished. Like everything else in his high pressure life, done and finished almost as it was spoken of. She packed for him with frantic haste.

"Cobbie will take good care of you," he said abruptly. "He's very reliable. My oldest, most trusted friend."

"What trouble are you expecting in MacQueensport?" she asked bluntly.

He gave her a swift look. His blue eyes were narrowed, but they looked bright, alive. In a way she knew he was enjoying this, even though he'd had to be pushed into it. "Business trouble. Maybe nothing else. We'll see."

For a moment she almost hated him. Whatever the real trouble was, the big trouble, he was determined not to share it with her.

"Cobbie will give you the picture," he said calmly. "You'll have lots of time to talk, driving North. Let him take care of everything on his credit card. I'll settle with him when you get to MacQueensport."

Once again, managed!

But she felt bereft when his jetliner took off, winging up out of the Bahamas across the blue Caribbean. She turned to Cobham, standing beside her watching the great plane disappear from view, and tried to smile. It didn't quite come off.

"I'm sorry," he said gently, "to have interrupted your honeymoon like this. Believe me it was necessary."

Her heart wept. Why couldn't Duke have taken her with him?

It was only a short hop to Miami where they picked up Duke's long white car.

Driving North, Cobham tried to explain just why all this

was necessary. But all she got out of it was that the company's funds were being run off somehow into another smaller company, controlled by a shadowy group who operated through other men's names, and if Duke didn't seize control at the next annual stockholders' meeting, which was coming up soon, he might well find his empire dismantled and the golden eggs all gone.

"All in strictest confidence, of course," cautioned Cobbie.

"Of course." She waited until he ran down about business, played the record out. Then:

"Tell me about Lorna," she said.

He caught his breath, frowned, and seemed to concentrate harder on the road ahead. "What about Lorna?"

"What was she like?"

"Lorna was a dark beauty, slender, reckless, wild. Always ready to take a dare or fling one. A vivid girl and she grew up to be a beautiful woman."

Not like me, she thought. *Not like me at all!* And asked, "Did Duke know her long before he married her?"

"All his life. You see—" Cobbie turned to make her better understand, told her there was a lot she needed to know about the County, about Duke. Told her that Vairstown and MacQueensport were adjoining towns in which the Vairs and the MacQueens and the Franklyns were the big people originally. The towns were dominated by the Vair Iron Works, the MacQueen Foundry and Franklyn Steel—and very small and fledgling Tarrant Steel—until Duke Tarrant brought them all together in mergers and formed a powerful combine.

"Duke told me you'd give me the picture," she said steadily. "And I want you to. All of it."

"Duke merged Franklyn Steel with Tarrant Steel in friendly fashion—he always got along well with Latham Franklyn, although now I hear his widow may be having second thoughts about it. Duke took over Vair Iron Works in a wild proxy fight but managed to stay friends with Coleman Vair—Cole never was too interested in the business; his father built it up. Cole would rather spend than earn any day."

He frowned. "And you'll hear stories, I'm sure. You'll hear people say Duke married Lorna MacQueen because her foundry adjoined Tarrant Steel and he had to have it and the railroad spurs there to ever attain the size he needed."

"Is it true?" asked Diane steadily, keeping her eyes on the palmetto clumps that dotted the landscape.

"No. Duke loved Lorna. She was young, beautiful. She had a memorable face, dark hair, green eyes. No one who saw her ever forgot her. She had an impact on everyone."

Diane closed her eyes.

Memorable. . . . Something about that description of Lorna reminded her of Duke. A wild, reckless pair. Made for each other. . . . She felt left out suddenly, tired and very sad. These were things she could never be.

She could picture them together, The Duke and his Lady, riding out on a pair of spirited horses, dancing the night away. Lorna in a black dress, reckless, ineffably sleek, experienced. With a face that even this dry old man beside her called memorable.

She sat there, desolate, hating Lorna.

"What happened to her?"

"She died."

"How?"

"It was an accident. She was alone in the house. Apparently she fell down the stairs, struck her head on the newel post, cut her wrist in the fall, and bled to death without regaining consciousness. Terrible shock to everyone and worse for Duke. He found the body. About a year later Duke resigned as President and Chairman of the Board and just dropped out of sight. He had a mailing address in Miami, but no one knew where he was until he called me. And in his absence," said Cobham, getting back to his main interest, "things have gone to pot."

Bled to death . . . alone in the house. Diane shivered.

"That would have been at—Queenscourt? What's it like?"

"Very large. Tudor half-timbered and brick. It was Lorna's family home. She was an only child. When her father died she inherited Queenscourt as well as the foundry. Duke grew up on a neighboring farm and then after college joined his Uncle in the steel business. That's how he knew Lorna. As children, they played together, rode together—Duke and Lorna and Coleman Vair and Ginny Westcott."

Coleman Vair, she knew, was Vair Iron Works. But who was Ginny Westcott?

He smiled. "Virginia Westcott of Westwind. That's the name of the house next to Queenscourt. And the next one up

the road is Vair Hall, Coleman Vair's house. Big names, all in a row. And next to Vair Nall is The Elms—the old Franklyn place; the Harrises own it now. The Westcotts were major stockholders in Vair Iron Works. Like the Vairs and the Franklyns, they're now big stockholders in Tarrant Steel. Duke was the poorest of the bunch. And now he's the richest." His voice rang with pride in his protege.

"Did Lorna love him?"

Cobbie moved his shoulders uneasily. "Lorna loved life," he said. "And men. I guess she loved Duke too. In her way."

I know that way. Like a bird in flight. She saw him and she watched him and she swooped down and took him.

"I guess they loved each other," said Cobham. "It was a stormy sort of marriage."

"They lived at Queenscourt?"

"Yes, they lived at Queenscourt. After Lorna died, Duke inherited it. He kept it open for about a year. When he left, he just closed it up. No one has lived in it since."

"Then it just—sits?"

"Yes."

She sat back, wondering about that. "Kitty Feverell asked me if we were going to live at Queenscourt, and I said 'Maybe later' and she said 'Want to bet?' What did she mean by that?"

"I wouldn't pay too much attention," said Cobham, "to anything Kitty Feverell says. She can make more trouble, faster, with her tongue, than anyone I've ever known. If I were you, I'd make friends with Ginny Westcott and Hildegard and Ben Harris, who bought the old Franklyn place next to Vair Hall. You'll find them much more neighborly."

"I should have flown up ahead, if anyone did," fretted Diane. "I could have opened up Queenscourt and had everything ready for Duke."

Cobham turned and gave her a strange look. "Oh, I don't think Duke has any intention of opening up Queenscourt."

"You don't?" She blinked. "But it's his home, isn't it?"

He sighed. "Yes. But I think it more than likely you'll be staying at a hotel."

She regarded him narrowly. "Who is Francie?"

"Francie? Oh, you probably mean Francine Pelton, Lorna's stepsister. After Lorna's mother Marnie MacQueen died, Ronald MacQueen married her divorced sister Garnet."

"Somebody mentioned an accident."

"A riding accident. Francine's horse refused a jump, threw her into a ravine. They thought at first she wouldn't live, but some doctor in New York put her back together again and she married him."

"Kitty said she was getting a divorce."

Cobbie shrugged, as if to say, *Like mother, like daughter*. . . . His manner had become forbidding and Diane sat back, feeling she had quizzed him all she dared.

Driving North with Cobham would have been a pleasure under other circumstances. But Diane barely saw the tropical landscape of Florida melt into the classic contours of the Old South. When they stopped at restaurants she would eat her food, barely tasting it, and she spent the night tossing about in bed, worrying about Collins County, worrying about Duke.

"Well," said Cobham with a smile, as they crossed the Ohio line at last. "Back, as they say, to God's country!"

No, she thought with a sad little twist of the knife in her heart, *back to Lorna's country*. For Lorna, even in death, had been able to drive The Duke from his hotel tower by the sea. And now, it seemed, even her memory was enough to keep him from his home at Queenscourt.

An hour out of town, Cobham made a phone call and told Diane that Duke was holed up in a hotel. Had taken a suite, to be exact, atop a big downtown Westwind Hotel. Ginny Westcott's grandfather had built the Westwind, he told her humorously and had had to be restrained by his wife from calling it the Westcott Ho!

Diane laughed at that. She was beginning to feel she would like Ginny Westcott. It would be good to have a woman friend in a place Duke found so hostile. Duke had Cobbie. She too would need someone.

"This is the County line," said Cobham, and she strained forward with new interest. An agricultural region met her gaze. She turned to Cobham in surprise; somehow she had expected steel mills.

"It's a big county," he explained.

The rich soil of Ohio rolled by them, sleepy in summer, hot and mellow. Oak trees, sycamore, maple, elm, shading blue grass pastures, neat wire fence, fields of tall corn waving green. Clumps of orange daylilies reared their lovely heads by the roadside. The houses were neat, mostly frame, and usu-

ally painted white. The barns were trim, in good repair. This was a well kept land, she felt, tended by tidy-minded people.

And then abruptly there was a change. The land roughened a bit, grew more rolling. A spattering of buildings appeared. And in the distance, a smokestack, belching a white cloud.

"We're approaching MacQueensport now. Coming in from the South."

"Is this the part Duke is from?"

"No." He waved his arm vaguely to the East. "Over that way. You'll see it another day." He seemed eager to get back and she guessed how anxious he was to talk to Duke, to see if Duke had learned anything, what the situation looked like now.

She watched houses race by the window for, unwittingly, Cobham had stepped down harder on the accelerator.

"Franklyn Steel." He pointed off to the right. "It's a subsidiary of Tarrant Steel now, of course."

This was a steel town, all right, she thought. Just like the movies. Lots of indeterminate, hodge-podge houses, heavy industry, new cars on the streets, strong-looking people with keen eyes and big bones. As if they bent the steel bars themselves, she thought, amused, and was picked up by the excitement of industry suddenly, carried along.

"I see why Duke likes it," she exclaimed. "There's—motion here. Don't you feel it?"

"Only that I'm exceeding the speed limit." He brought the car back to normal driving speed.

Diane sniffed the air. "I hadn't expected the air to be so clean."

"Oh, that's Duke's doing," said Cobbie absently. "He was a front runner in pollution control. Not everybody approved at the time, but it was less costly in the end."

My front runner, she thought with pride.

The downtown was like any other small Midwestern city's downtown. Neither more nor less. It had a couple of competing "good" department stores, a rash of shops, cafes, movie houses, a big brick courthouse since this was the County Seat, a general hubbub.

The long white car slid to a halt under the marquee of the Westwind Hotel and she gazed up to see that it was the tall-

est building in the town and quite handsome. Ginny Westcott, obviously, if she owned this, was not broke either!

She was disappointed that Duke had not come down to meet them, but Cobham hurried her through the lobby. A couple of curious glances followed them as they took the elevator to the top floor.

"Best suite in the house," Cobbie told her. Nothing small about The Duke!

Duke did not come to the door. He was on the telephone. He called "Come in" and swung around and waved to them briefly and went back to his phone call. Diane felt somewhat dashed at his reception, and only slightly mollified when Duke put down the phone after a couple of minutes and gave her a quick kiss.

His eyes looked worried.

"What have you learned?" asked Cobham.

"Nothing good." Duke drummed his fingers. It's worse than I thought. Seems quite a few people have lost confidence in me." He turned to Cobham with decision. "Looks like we'll have to go out on the open market and buy up stock. If we're going to swing it. Even then it will be tricky."

"I haven't much cash," said Cobham quietly. "I can borrow a little."

"I have some. But I'm going to need quite a lot. Anything changed at the banks?"

They were settling down to business talk now. She might just as well not be in the room for any attention that would be paid to her. She found the bedroom and flung her scarf and purse on the bed and then took off her dress and stretched out in her slip.

Another luxurious hotel suite. What did they call this one? The Presidential Suite? The Executive Suite? She pictured in her mind the farm boy in the fertile valley Cobham had described, looking up at the spires of the great hotels, at the tall towers that were smokestacks, rising like castle keeps above the Ohio plain, determined to rise to those heights . . . and he had.

You had to admire that rise, of course. It was just that it would be nice if he who had risen had a few moments to spare for his wife.

Well, there was no point fretting about it. She went into the adjoining "Colonial" style bathroom with its handsome

red flock wallpaper, like cut velvet on the walls—the Westwind's best, no doubt—turned an ornate handle and began to run the water for her bath.

She was soaking luxuriously among the bubbles when Duke knocked on the door, said he was sorry, he had to run up to Cleveland, he'd be back tomorrow; no, she couldn't go with him, he had barely time to catch his plane. She turned off the water and tried to spring out of the tub, but his footsteps were already hurrying away. He was saying something about banks. She heard the door close.

Damn, she thought miserably. Damn!

So she spent the first night of their reunion in the Westwind hotel alone, for Cobham had gone up to Cleveland with Duke.

She sent down for her dinner and had it served in her room, not caring to face a great—and possibly half empty—dining room alone. The food looked good, but she wasn't hungry.

But the next day when a telegram arrived saying Duke was delayed and would not be in until possibly midnight or after, she tossed the telegram down on the table and dressed to go out. There was after all, she told herself rebelliously, no point in hiding here. She would walk around the town, do a little shopping maybe, get her bearings.

She found MacQueensport a pleasant enough town. She lingered in the tearoom of the big Lennox Department Store. There were women around, scented, well-dressed, leisurely looking women. She guessed more than a few would know Duke.

When she went to the ladies' lounge, she learned that was indeed true.

The lounge already had two occupants when she arrived, combing their hair and making up their faces before a mirrored wall—two women, one red-haired, one silver. The silver one, Diane decided, was definitely wearing a wig—it looked more like nylon than hair. But as it was combed out she saw that the silver color had been skillfully imparted, that the hair belonged in truth to its owner, an overweight woman in black that the other woman called "Flo".

Diane sat down on an empty pink vinyl and bamboo stool next to them and got out her lipstick. She had a hard time keeping her hand steady for the first words she heard, from

the silver-haired one, were "Guess what, Alice. Duke Tarrant's back and he's got a new wife!"

"No! Flo, I don't believe it!"

"And they're going to live at Queenscourt. So Kitty says."

There was a peal of wild laughter. "You mean they're going to *try* to live at Queenscourt. Lorna will never allow it!"

Diane finished making up her mouth with an unsteady hand and left as unobtrusively as possible. Her heart was pounding. So Kitty was already back, spinning wild tales. Well, Cobbie had warned her.

And Flo and Alice obviously believed those tales. But what did they mean, *Lorna will never allow it*.

Lorna was dead. Wasn't she?

Chapter 3

When she got back to the hotel she tossed her bag on the bed and sank down on the edge and brooded about that. After a while she lay down and dozed off and the phone rang. Duke! She picked it up with trembling fingers.

A woman's voice spoke, high, light, slightly questioning. "May I speak to Mrs. Tarrant, please?"

Diane collected her wits. "This is Mrs. Tarrant speaking."

"Oh, good," said the voice. "Diane, this is Ginny Westcott. Cobbie asked me to call, said you'd be lonely."

Kind Cobbie!

"I am, frankly," said Diane honestly. "Duke and Cobbie are off—" she started to say where and then with some new wariness bit off the words—"leaving me high and dry!" she finished gaily.

"Well, I thought maybe I could pick you up in my car and we could have a bite downtown and maybe see a show?"

Diane thought that would be lovely and said so.

And Ginny said, still in that cool light voice, "Pick you up in an hour."

She met Ginny in the lobby. It would, she supposed, have been nicer to have had Ginny up to the suite first for a drink, but she somehow wanted to get away from the top of the tower and down among human kind. She asked the desk clerk to page her when Miss Westcott arrived and then jumped when her name rang out, sounding very loud: "Mrs. Tarrant. Mrs. Duke Tarrant."

She turned to see a woman in an expensive pink linen suit standing by the desk, and knew at once that this slender woman standing there negligently, but with a look of authority stamped on her stance, could be none other than Ginny Westcott. Virginia Westcott was a silver blonde of the washed-out variety. She had an almost pretty face, an almost

pretty smile, an almost pretty figure. Nothing was quite right, everything was almost. But what money could do had been done. Only her eyes were lovely. They were luminous and soft gray, sort of mother-of-pearl. They opened very wide and stared at you fixedly. She had a small, almost cupid's bow mouth and a too thin face that would with age become a hatchet face. Her movements were rather fluid and graceful, but the lines of her—in spite of a top designer's efforts—were too thin, lacking somehow.

She moved forward with that inborn confidence that came from having stood all her life on solid moneyed ground. "Diane? I'm Ginny Westcott." And Diane was reminded that Ginny owned this hotel, that the deferential look on the part of the desk clerk was probably for her and not for Mrs. Duke Tarrant.

"It's so nice to meet you at last," she said, smiling and holding out her hand.

"Oh?" Ginny inclined her head a little, in a wrenlike gesture. "Duke has spoken of me?"

"Of course," lied Diane gallantly. "Duke and Cobbie. They both sing your praises."

"How nice," said Ginny in that high light voice. "Shall we go out somewhere? I get tired of this gloomy place." She indicated the big marble-floored lobby with a shrug.

Out they went. Ginny did most of the talking, keeping her light luminous eyes on Diane's face. Diane felt Ginny might be pumping her for news for the "crowd" to exclaim over, but didn't care—it was nice to talk to another woman for a change. Especially nice since this one was an old friend of Duke's.

Ginny drove them across town and they ate in a secluded little place with dark paneling and trophies on the walls. The food was good, served on big plates with monograms. Ginny explained that the present proprietor's grandfather had started this restaurant, had ordered those plates. Diane was duly impressed. Ginny, she guessed, was impressing her with MacQueensport traditions, subtly telling the Eastern girl that this was no raw frontier she had come to.

"Who have you met?" asked Ginny. "Of the crowd, that is?"

"Only you and Cobbie and Kitty and Todd Feverell."

"Oh, well, that's hardly anybody," said Ginny. "Why don't

we skip the show and run over to the Country Club for a drink after dinner?" And Diane had a funny feeling that everything had been leading up to this, the drink at the Country Club.

Ginny ate slowly, lingering over her steak, over the wine, so that it was quite dusky out when they climbed again into her Mercedes and wound through the streets of MacQueensport toward the Country Club.

"It's quite a long way out," Ginny explained, and Diane finally got up the courage to ask what she really wanted to know.

"Ginny," she said, "you and Duke and Lorna and someone called Coleman Vair grew up together, didn't you?"

"And someone called Coleman Vair," repeated Ginny in a wooden voice. "Yes, that's right," more brightly. "We were all very close. Always. From the time we were children."

"What was Lorna like? I don't really—*see* her, if you know what I mean?"

"Oh? Well—" Ginny dodged an oncoming car with practiced expertise. "We were the same age, birthdays a week apart. I don't know that I could really describe her. Lorna was like no one else. She got—a hold on things. On people, if you know what I mean."

"I think I do," said Diane slowly.

"And she didn't let go."

"And what happened then?"

"Nothing. Lorna just used them until she was through with them and then threw them away. She'd have done that to Duke too if she hadn't died."

"You . . . didn't like her then?"

Ginny shrugged. "You didn't like or dislike Lorna. She held people in thrall. They didn't have any will to resist her." She turned her large luminous eyes on Diane. "Did you ever know somebody like that?"

"No." *And I don't want to*, she thought, aghast.

"Well, Lorna was wonderful looking, of course. And she'd try anything, ride anything. She'd get out on the road and see how fast she could drive. It used to make Duke so *mad*! He said she was going to kill herself going so fast." She shrugged. "And one day she did."

"Kill herself?" Diane felt faint.

"I suppose you could call it that. She fell down the stairs. Probably never even looked where she was going. Typical."

They were out on the superhighway now, racing along, and the last rays of the dying sun were behind them.

"Now on your right you'll see upcoming our one, our only Country Club." Ginny waved a careless arm.

It was then Diane saw it. Coming up fast on the left. A long sprawling house set in a grove of trees and half hidden by them. It looked dark at this distance but two of its windows caught the light suddenly and beamed a look at her, like a pair of yellow eyes.

She stared at that house, fascinated. It had a brooding look about it.

"Ginny." She turned and touched the arm Ginny was waving. "What is that place? The house on the left?"

Ginny paused, and in that pause Diane turned back to look at the house and frowned. Ginny had seemed to be driving the Mercedes smoothly down the road, but the car must have wavered a little because the house seemed to have subtly changed position, to have drawn itself together a little, turned, as if to see her better. The setting sun no longer glanced so directly off its windows; trees, framing the house, had narrowed those yellow eyes to slits. An optical illusion, she told herself uneasily. But strange. Her own gaze wavered under that silent uncanny stare.

"That?" Ginny's light voice sounded surprised. "But I thought you knew. That's Queenscourt."

Chapter 4

"And now," Ginny turned the Mercedes sharply to the right down a private road, "here's the Country Club."

The Country Club had the look of a long low farmhouse to which magnificent columns and a huge stone-floored verandah and a couple of flaring wings had been added. This was in fact the case, Ginny explained. The original house had been Duke's boyhood home; this was the Tarrant "home place" that Duke had sold when his parents died and he had invested the proceeds in his Uncle's struggling Tarrant Steel Corporation—with spectacular results.

Duke's home place. Diane looked around her at the sweeping manicured lawns that had once been meadows blowing in the wind, alight with daisies; at the golf course that had replaced what Ginny told her had once been some of the tallest corn in the State; at the lake, which had been expanded from three of the farm ponds to form a horseshoe-shaped lake suitable for boating; at the big comfortable barn now converted to a stable, to which had been added a paddock and white board fencing.

Inside were Duke's friends, "dying" to see her. With Ginny chattering beside her, Diane took a deep breath and took the plunge.

"Diane!" The first voice to reach her was Kitty Feverell's—amused, piercing, slightly scolding. "You and Duke didn't tell us you were coming right back to the States!" *You naughty girl*, her tone implied.

"Well, it was a sudden decision," smiled Diane, rising to the occasion. "You know how it is."

"Oh, yes, indeed I do," murmured Kitty. "When the honeymoon is over. . . ."

Diane flushed. That wasn't quite what she had meant.

Someone shoved a drink into her hand, and then she was

surrounded by people whom Ginny gaily introduced: The Flemings, the Tylers, the Danvilles, Clive Vandervoort, Archer and Frieda Payne, Flo and Harry Barth (she greeted Flo blandly, wondering if she'd be remembered from the ladies' lounge; plainly she wasn't). She gathered that most of these people "hung out" here every night, that one could always find them here and she was simply the newest attraction to engage their fickle attention.

She met Chester Banning too. The current President of Tarrant Steel was a smallish man, bald on top, with darting brown eyes and nervous gestures. He greeted Diane absently and those eyes kept darting around. She had a feeling he was looking for his wife and was afraid he would find her. A few minutes later she heard someone mutter "There's Leda Banning. Who's she with now?" and understood the reason for his nervousness. Leda Banning was a pretty young thing, clad in a long denim skirt, with long burnished brown hair and a roving eye. She kept throwing back her head and laughing in an excited way, and she was surrounded by men. With an anguished look, Chester Banning detached himself from his companions and strode toward her. The group around her parted to let him in, a few words were spoken and then Diane saw Banning, a smile frozen on his face, leading his wife away, literally, by a tight grip on her arm. At the door she turned and gave them all a brilliant smile and blew a kiss toward the group she had just left, and Diane thought, *Cobbie didn't exaggerate. No wonder Chester Banning can't concentrate on running Tarrant Steel!*

"He's got his hands full with her," someone commented, and there was general laughter. But Diane remembered the tormented look on Banning's face and pitied him.

She was grateful for Ginny. Ginny stayed loyally by her side, fending off any remarks that landed too close to home, neatly evading catty Kitty, keeping Diane propelled around the room until they could find a pleasant corner "to enjoy our drinks in peace back here out of the rat race." Well, Cobbie had said she'd like Ginny.

Hildegard Harris joined them. She was tall, spare, and she didn't walk, she strode. Her hair was straight and dark brown and pulled back and her hazel eyes looked at you steadily. Diane liked her at once.

"You must have Duke bring you over for a drink," she

urged Diane. And if he's too busy, just drop by yourself. We're the third place from Queenscourt in that direction." She stabbed at the air, laughed. "You can't miss us. Most run-down grounds in the County. Always meaning to do something about it, but I get bogged down in the stables. You ride, of course?"

"Yes," said Diane. At least that was one thing they had taught her in Virginia!

"Good. You'll have to come riding with us. Matter of fact, you can ride one of Duke's horses—Topaz. He sold his horses to us when he left. Except for Satan. Satan was Lorna's favorite and Francie bought him." She looked as if she had said something wrong and rushed on nervously. "Tell Duke we'll sell them back to him if he wants them. Laughing Lady's had her foal now. Real beauty. He'll want her if he sees her, but hands off, she's mine! You'll live at Queenscourt, of course?"

"We haven't decided."

"Oh?" That sort of trailed off in the air.

Diane decided it would be a good idea to duck out of the conversation at this point.

"Which way is the powder room?" she asked. "I want to comb my hair. It must look awful."

"That way." Hildegard stabbed at the air again. "Wait till I finish my drink and I'll join you."

"I'll find it. Be right back," said Diane airily and started out into the pale green painted corridor. The corridor took a sudden turn and then there were alternative routes. She plunged toward the left. Obviously the wrong way, she decided, since it promptly led her out onto the porch. There were tall shrubs in enormous pots on that porch, big enough for people to hide behind. Behind one of them she could hear voices and she approached, thinking to ask directions.

And stopped, as their words reached her.

"Doesn't Duke have incredible gall?" drawled a woman's voice. "Bringing a bride back here?"

"Well, after all," demurred a cultivated masculine voice, "nobody ever *proved* anything."

"Proof?" A scoffing tone. "Oh, that's for lawyers! Everybody knows Duke killed his wife!"

Diane stood as if rooted to the flagstones of the porch. For a moment she couldn't move. It was as if she had been ex-

pecting these words, she thought, stricken. Almost as if she had been waiting to hear them.

This then would explain it. The something wrong that she had felt in Nassau. Cobbie's overheard question, "This young wife of yours, does she know about—?" It accounted for Duke's attitude, his failure to mention his first wife before he married Diane, his reticence, his unwillingness to return.

But he couldn't have killed Lorna. Not Duke. Not her Duke, the fierce yet gentle lover. No, not Duke. She wouldn't believe it. She'd never believe it.

She turned and fled through the first door that opened and ran directly into the arms of a tall man who blocked her way.

"Oh, I'm sorry!" She would have ricocheted right back against the wall, but he caught her shoulders and held her, laughing, for a moment.

"Gotcha!" he said. "Oops, did I spill my drink on your dress?" And then, releasing her shoulders, he said with lively interest, "You'll be Duke's new wife!"

"How did you know?" she asked defensively.

"Oh, you couldn't be anybody else," he murmured. "Fragile, blue-eyed, blonde."

What did he mean by that? Lorna was dark, wasn't she?

"Well, you catapulted into the right person," he said, "to show you round. I'm Coleman Vair."

"Oh." Her face cleared. "You grew up with Duke?"

"Like brothers. Ginny said she'd brought you out and I was walking around looking for you. Didn't quite expect you to come running into my arms, but one can be grateful for small favors."

She looked up at him. Her head was still whirling with what she had overheard on the porch. She saw a tall man, a shade more slender than Duke, a trifle more lightly built. His hair was dark, his eyes a warm brown, his face thinner than Duke's. He was deeply tanned. Golf course tan, she decided. Gotten right here at the Country Club. She wondered suddenly what he must think of her, pelting in off the porch like that.

"I lost my way," she said lamely, "to the powder room."

"Well, I'll personally escort you," he said. "Can't have the best looking girl in Collins County getting lost." He missed a step and she saw that he was very drunk. Wasn't it awfully

early in the evening for that? she wondered, puzzled. Cobbie hadn't said Coleman Vair was a lush.

They turned a corner and there was Ginny. With Hildegard at her side, eyebrows slightly raised. Seeing them, Ginny frowned.

"Cole," she said crossly, "are you giving Diane a hard time?"

He made her a sweeping bow. "Fairy godmother, mother confessor," he said, "I never give anyone a hard time." He straightened up with difficulty. "Diane is my witness. I never give anyone a hard time," he said thickly.

"Hildegard, show Diane the way to the powder room," said Ginny with a sigh. "Come along, Cole. I'll take you home."

"Don't want to go home." Cole waved an expansive arm that held an empty glass. "Don't ever want to go home. Last place. . . ."

Still protesting, he let Ginny lead him away.

Hildegard said ruefully, "As you can see, Cole drinks."

"Yes, I see that."

"But he's a wonderful fellow," said Hildegard. "By the way, you must call me 'Hilde'; everybody does."

"Hilde," said Diane automatically. Her mind was still swirling. Then, "Hilde, do you think I could leave a message for Ginny? I didn't realize it was so late and I must get back. I'll call a taxi. Will you be here to tell her thanks for a wonderful evening, but I had to leave?"

"Better yet," said Hilde with her nice smile, "I'll drop you off at your hotel. I have to stop by to placate an angry mother-in-law—oops, don't let Ben hear that! Anyway—" she brushed off Diane's protestations—"it's no bother, and we can leave word with Rudy at the bar. Ginny's sure to get the message. As a matter of fact," she grinned, "it's very unlikely that Cole won't follow her right back here. Weaving along in his car."

"Across that superhighway? Drunk?" Diane was appalled.

"Oh, it isn't as bad as all that. There's a cloverleaf on down. Of course, there have been a couple of nasty accidents. Like Cornelia last year—" She stopped suddenly, looked stricken. "But you wanted to comb your hair first, didn't you?" she said quickly. "And here I'm trying to hurry you out!"

"It's all right. I'll comb it back home." Diane wanted only

one thing, to get back to the top of the tower of the Westwind Hotel. To think. To pace about and think. This town considered her husband a murderer. That at least was obvious.

And some were willing to forgive him for it. Why? Had Lorna been so hated?

She needed answers and she needed them from Duke. She'd ask him. Tonight.

Chapter 5

But when he came back, she didn't ask him after all. She had paced the thick gold carpet for hours before his return, rehearsing how she would put it. She'd say, "I went to the Country Club—" and then she'd blurt out the whole story and he would tell her, of course, that there was nothing to it, that people here had nothing to do but rehash old tragedies and try to make something of them that wasn't there. Of course he would.

When she heard his key in the lock, she tensed, waiting for him. He came in like a plane landing, swept in, slamming the door in his wake. He looked very angry.

"Damned bankers!" he said, and then he took a look at her face and grinned. "Sorry, Diane. Didn't mean to scare you."

"What happened?"

"Well, they were willing to lend me some money. Not enough. Not quite enough." His eyes narrowed. "I had it all set up. I can't help thinking somebody got to them. The question is, who. . . ." He was thinking out loud now.

She said, twisting her fingers behind her back, "Duke, I went to the Country Club tonight."

"Good," he said absently. "Get to know people. Mix around. Ginny will steer you in the right direction." He tossed his briefcase on the table, strode toward the bedroom, stripping off his coat and tie as he walked.

Diane followed, her long pale blue robe swaying. "I met Coleman Vair tonight, Duke."

"Oh? Cole's a good fellow. Drinks too much. Always did. Worse now though. Should have gotten married."

"I saw Queenscourt today," she said, still beating around the bush. She pushed back her blonde hair with a restless hand. "Ginny Westcott took me to dinner and then out to the Country Club for a drink and we passed it."

He was busy pouring himself a drink.

"It's awfully *large*, Duke. Who takes care of it?"

"Cobbie has the keys. He runs out there and checks things about twice a month," said Duke absently.

"Ginny told me the Club had been your old home."

"They've added so much to it, it's hard to find the part I lived in," said Duke.

"Do you ever miss farming?"

"Miss *farming*?" He sounded amazed. "I never farmed, Diane. My father farmed, and I think you could say I helped out on the farm. That's all. Farming is a specialized science, in case you aren't aware. There's a hell of a lot to know. I was never interested in learning. When I got out of high school, my Uncle shipped me off to Princeton. I came back hot to make Tarrant Steel the colossus of the ages. My parents died while I was at school and when I came back I sold the farm, put my money into the company. My Uncle liked my ideas; after a while he let me run it for him. I bought up a couple of new processes, patents, went out on a limb with the banks, floated some loans that were way above our heads, landed some defense contracts and we skittered through it. I don't mind telling you it was a near thing. We were nearly washed out three times. When my Uncle died, he left me his stock."

"Duke," she blurted out desperately, "I overheard two people talking at the Club. I don't know who they were, but one of them said 'Everybody knows Duke killed his wife.'"

He turned and faced her, a tall arrogant figure in his white shirt. He had the expression of a man who has decided to stop running, to meet his enemies head on. "You'll find a lot of people around here think that, Diane. It's one of the reasons I didn't want to bring you back here."

"But that's terrible! You should do something about it!"

He gave her a sardonic look. "What would you suggest?"

Yes, what *did* you do if somebody said that about you?

"Ignore the gossip," advised Duke, sinking down in a big chair, stretching his long legs. "Forget the past. We've got something more pressing to worry about. The future. It could be snatched away from us. If things go badly, we could find ourselves flat broke."

She caught her breath. "What do you mean?"

"I mean," said Duke levelly, "that I took what I could get

from the banks, but it wasn't enough. I'm off tomorrow scouring the countryside for more. And for proxies. I'll be back Thursday night sometime, probably early. But the problem is, Diane, I've put us out on a limb for everything we have and more. I've pledged your stock too—Cobbie will be around tomorrow to have you sign the certificates. I have to buy up every share I can between now and the Annual Stockholders' Meeting. I won't have enough proxies to seize control; I've got to make up the difference by going out on the open market and buying up the stock. It's very expensive, but I think I can do it."

"Yes," she said, inadequately.

"Hell, I didn't want to put you through this." He slammed the palm of his hand down on the lamp table beside him. A big ashtray rattled. "It's why I didn't bring you back here in the first place. I didn't want us to live in a welter of ugly rumors and half truths. Those people you overheard at the Club say I killed Lorna didn't happen to add why I wasn't tried, did they? They forgot to mention that one Mattie Sue Lingerly, who knew me well by sight, saw me driving home that day. Said she was sure. Had a new watch. Kept looking at it. Said I passed her on the road at exactly two o'clock. I got home and called the police at 2:05. That's on record. They established that Lorna had been dead since 1:30. Didn't happen to mention that, did they?" His face was grim.

"No." She felt a wash of pure joy sweeping over her. "They didn't."

"Now I want you to take this money." He pulled out a roll of bills and put it on the table. "And go to Virginia and stay there until this is over. Visit friends. Or take a little place of your own. The battle is shaping up and it may get very ugly before it's over. I want you out of it."

She was stunned. "But why can't I stay here?"

"I'm in what is lightly called a financial bind. I'm giving up this suite tomorrow; it's too damned expensive. I'll move in with Cobbie until the stockholders' meeting."

"I don't want to leave you," she protested, and he leaned forward.

"Look at it this way, Diane. I've got to keep up a front. If you stay here and we rent some little cottage, it will look bad. As if we're broke. If you're off to Virginia, it's natural enough for me to move in with Cobbie. Old friend, old times.

We can cover the phone for each other. Hell, I don't care if I live on beans until this thing is over!" He looked young and excited and she thought, aching, *This is what he wants; this is where he belongs, and he's sending me away.*

She looked so stricken, he took her hand, pulled her close to him. "After it's over, Diane, we'll take up again where we left off. I hope. If I don't win this one, things are going to be pretty thin for us. O. K.? So pack your things early, see me off to the airport. I'll leave the car with you so you can drive East, gives you more flexibility, and I can use Cobbie's car. After you've seen me off, you can come back here and Cobbie will give you the papers to sign and get you checked out and started for Virginia. I'll be back on Thursday night, probably early, and you can call me at Cobbie's. Here's the number." He scrawled a number on a piece of paper, handed it to her. "Make it after ten to be on the safe side. You follow me?"

"I follow," she said weakly.

He had brushed away the goblins, the need for explanations. This was real, tangible, the need for money, the need to look as if you had it. These were things she understood, had coped with before, back in Virginia, after her parents died. Oh, she knew how to save, all right!

"I'll do my best," she said.

"That's good enough." He swept her up in his arms. "I feel like I've been away a month," he said with feeling, and kicked the bedroom door shut behind him as he went through it, and carried her over to the great waiting bed.

He might not have been so light-hearted, she thought, if he had known what she was planning.

Duke left next morning, by plane. She drove him to the airport and kissed him good-by in the bright sunshine. He looked brisk and competent and handsome standing there with the sun glinting off the gray wings in his dark hair. Regal, she thought proudly. Autocratic. *And mine.*

"Good luck, Diane." He kissed her.

It seemed to her that she should be saying that to him instead of the other way around.

"Good-by till Thursday," she said.

"Call me." He waved and was gone. Minutes later his plane roared away into the blue Ohio sky.

So Cobbie had the keys to Queenscourt. . . .

She climbed into the long white car and started back to the hotel through the morning traffic. Duke had given her a thousand dollars. She ought to be able to do quite a bit with that.

Cobbie came round with the papers, as Duke had promised, right after she got back to the suite. She met him with a bright smile, poured him a drink.

"How do you like our fair city?" he asked her, his gaze approving her soft beige silk pants suit, belted with bright links of golden metal.

"Not much," she said frankly, "but perhaps I could learn to."

"Oh?" He eyed her as if he felt that were an intelligent answer, which was more than he had expected. "Duke told me you're off to Virginia," he said, half-apologetically. "Very sensible under the circumstances. I'll pick up his things today. He's already checked out." He suddenly noticed the suitcases through the open bedroom door. "Good, I see you're packed. Sorry that—"

"Your condolences are appreciated," said Diane sweetly, "but you can save them for another time. Duke's things are staying with me. I'm not going to Virginia."

"Oh? Where then?"

"I'm going to open up Queenscourt."

Cobbie looked at her, thunderstruck. He set down his glass. "Does Duke know about this, Diane?"

She shook her head, delighted. "I'm going to surprise him."

"You will indeed surprise him," said Cobham dryly. "But I'm not sure the surprise will be entirely pleasant."

"Of course it will. It's furnished, isn't it?" she asked anxiously. That was one problem she couldn't meet. If Duke had sold off the furniture.

"Completely furnished," nodded Cobham. "Right down to linen and dishes and silver." He looked uneasy.

"Well, then there's no problem." His eyebrows elevated and she leaned forward intensely. "Cobbie, I don't intend to be banished into the boondocks while Duke goes through this thing alone. I mean to be right here beside him, helping him all the way."

"Diane." Cobham cleared his throat. "I'm sure you mean well, but there are things you don't know."

"You mean that nasty gossip that Duke killed Lorna?" she asked bluntly.

Cobham frowned. "No, I don't mean that. I—well, we can clear it all up when Duke gets back on Thursday."

"Oh, no," said Diane, who had anticipated this reaction. "I'll need the keys today if I'm going to clean up the place and get it livable by Thursday."

Cobham's mouth was set in an obdurate fashion. "No, Diane, I can't take on this responsibility. If I could reach Duke now, I would. As it is, you'll just have to wait until Thursday. If Duke wants to give you the keys, that's his business."

"You don't seem to understand, Cobbie. I'm Duke's wife."

"And I'm his friend," said Cobham quietly. "And I don't think he would consider it a friendly act for me to give you the keys to Queenscourt in his absence."

"Why not?" she challenged.

"We'll let Duke go into that." He sighed. "In the meantime, here's what I need you to sign. Duke has pledged your forty thousand shares. You knew that, of course?"

"He told me."

"Good, good. Sign here." He held out his pen.

She made no move to take it. "Do I get the keys to Queenscourt? Right now?"

He shook his head.

"Then you don't get your signature."

Cobham looked shocked. "Diane," he said, "you don't seem to understand. Duke has *pledged* this stock. The bank has let him have the money on his word that I will get it up there today!"

She knew she was taking a long chance, but she felt that her future with Duke depended on it. She didn't want to be the kind of wife a man tucked away some place every time he was pushed into a tight corner. She wanted to be right there beside him, and this was her chance to prove she had the stuff to do it.

"I'll give you the signature when you give me the keys," she said stubbornly.

All of a sudden Cobbie looked very old. "All right," he said. "I don't know what Duke will say about this, but I *do* know what the bank will say if I don't get your signature up there! As it happens, I have the keys on me. I was going out there today and have a look around." He reached in his pocket and pulled out a large ring of keys, tossed them on the table. "Sign here," he said.

Quickly, Diane signed and picked up the keys.

"If I'm going to make a life with Duke, Cobbie," she said placatingly, "I have to begin now. I can't be just part of the baggage to be stored somewhere until needed. I'm sure you understand that."

A wry smile broke over Cobbie's face. "Except for—certain factors," he said surprisingly, "I think Duke would be rather proud of the way you handled this." He went to the door, gave her a small salute. "Good luck," he said. "You're going to need it."

"Would you arrange to have the utilities cut on today, Cobbie?"

"Certainly," he said. "Might as well be hanged for a goat as a sheep, if that's the expression."

She saw him out the door, the keys jangling in her hands. Whatever happened now, she told herself, MacQueensport was going to know, the *world* was going to know The Duke had taken a wife.

Chapter 6

When Cobbie had gone, shaking his head, Diane picked up the phone and called Ginny Westcott. A cool-voiced maid answered and in a moment Ginny's high light voice came over the phone.

"I called to say I was sorry about running away last night," said Diane. "It was just that I hadn't realized it was so late and I wanted to be here when Duke got back."

"A very good idea," Ginny agreed promptly. "And by the time I got Cole put to bed it was much later. So you did the right thing. Rudy told me."

Put Cole to bed. . . . Well, that was very neighborly of Ginny.

"And I wanted you to be the first to know," she told Ginny gaily, "that I'm opening Queenscourt!"

"My, oh, my," said Ginny. "Duke *is* full of surprises."

"Oh, he doesn't know about it," said Diane airily. "I'm going to surprise him."

There was a moment of silence on the other end of the line. She thought she heard Ginny catch her breath. "You mean Duke's not there?"

"No, he's gone. He won't be back till Thursday. You know the house, Ginny. Do you think I can get it ready by then?"

"Oh—habitable perhaps. I'll lend you Cammie and Jeff."

"Oh, I couldn't impose on you like that. Ginny, I hadn't planned to have any servants. You know, Duke and I haven't been married very long; we're still practically on our honeymoon, and—" She blushed at the lies she was telling Ginny.

"Nonsense," said Ginny. "Jeff can do the windows and tidy up the grounds. Cammie will scrub down the kitchen and the baths, and wax the floors. You'll have your hands full just dusting and airing and washing up the china and crystal.

Lorna had everything you could think of; the house is full of her plunder. There's a mountain of work there."

"I'm looking forward to it," said Diane. "As a matter of fact, I'm going out there now. I'll be there in—oh, about an hour. I want to pick up a couple of things in town. Cleanser, soap, wax, things like that."

"Fine. I'll start Jeff over there with hedge clippers and a lawn mower. You'll have lunch with me, of course. You'll be much too tired to cook."

Diane hung up the phone in a warm glow. Duke might have enemies, she told herself, but he had friends too. Real friends. Like Ginny.

She packed her things and rang for a bellhop. This just might be the last time they lived in a hotel, she told herself with a burst of confidence. Once Duke saw how well she could run a big house, how pleasant life could be there, he'd come around.

She closed her eyes to the thought that he might not come around. She wouldn't think about that just yet.

Once downstairs with her luggage piled into the trunk, she climbed into the long white car and started the motor thoughtfully. This was Wednesday. The house had been shut—how long? A year? And she had only two days to make it livable. She wondered in what condition she would find it. At a minimum it would need vacuuming, airing, dusting, scrubbing, window washing. She hoped there'd be a vacuum cleaner there; there was a limit to what she wanted to borrow from Ginny.

To be on the safe side, she stopped at a supermarket and picked up soap, detergent, cleanser, sponges, mop, pine oil, floor wax, window cleaner, furniture polish.

It was there she ran into Coleman Vair. He walked up, tall and smiling and boyishly handsome, with a couple of cans of tomato juice and an armful of mixers and stared at the assortment of cleaning equipment piled on the checkout counter in front of her.

"Well, what are you doing?" he asked, amazed. "Has the staff of the Westwind Hotel gone on strike? Or are you joining them?"

She laughed. "Hello, Mr. Vair."

"Call me 'Cole'."

"Very well, Cole. I think I might need this stuff. I'm opening Queenscourt."

"You *are*?" He sounded incredulous.

"Yes. Are you surprised?"

"Somewhat. No, that's the understatement of the year. I'm dumbfounded."

She laughed again. "So we're going to be neighbors after all."

"Here," he said, "let me help you get that stuff out to your car."

"Oh, don't bother, Cole. I can manage nicely." She turned her cart to avoid collision with another shopper. "Where's your car? Please don't go out of your way."

They moved out into the open parking lot. The sun beat down blisteringly on the asphalt. It was going to be another hot day. Cole leaned toward her with a grin. "I'm afraid I came by taxi. I *have* a car. I just don't, at the moment, know where it is. Seems I left it somewhere downtown last night at some late spot and met some friends and went on back to the Country Club with them. But they aren't available before noon and I can't for the life of me remember where I put it."

So he'd gone out again after Ginny took him home. She laughed. "Jump in and I'll give you a lift. You really were under the weather last night. But you knew right away, when I ran into you, that I was Duke's wife!"

"Did I say that?" He looked uncomfortable.

"Yes." She spun the wheel and they sped out of the parking lot. "You said I couldn't possibly be anyone else. What did you mean by that?"

"Well, at the risk of losing my ride," he said, "I'll tell you. I guessed who you were because you looked like the others."

"Others?" She felt a little chill of apprehension. "What others?"

"Well, after Duke—after Lorna died, Duke turned to a succession of fragile, blue-eyed blondes. Of which to date you are the best example."

"Really? Why do you think he did that?"

"I think it was a reaction to Lorna," said Cole, looking out of the window. "She was dark, you know—thick, sweeping dark hair and magnificent green eyes."

"Well, well," she said helplessly.

"And as a long-time connoisseur of fragile, blue-eyed blondes," he said, "I admire his selection."

"You're a very reassuring neighbor," she told him.

"Oh, not always." He flashed a smile at her. "I drink, you know. Come in singing at the top of my voice in the night. Clatter about trying to get in my own front door—which frequently resists my assault. It's very quiet on Trowbridge Road; sound carries a long way. I'll probably disturb you."

"Not at all," she said, smiling at him. "In a big house like that I'll be glad to hear a human voice."

"You may at that," he said. His tone was so peculiar she shot a look at him, but he didn't amplify it, began instead pointing out landmarks, telling her about the local places. She thought he might be going on so chattily to divert her from asking him something, and she would indeed have asked him, but she didn't know the question.

They drove past the Country Club on their right, past Queenscourt on their left, until the superhighway burst into a great cloverleaf with an underpass. Then at Cole's direction she swung off to the right and under the highway and turned left, parallel with the superhighway, but going back toward town; then they were skirting some woods when he told her to swing right again. It was a sharp right-angle turn with trees and tall bushes growing right up to the edge of the road and as Diane made the turn her heart gave a lunge for a heavy-set woman in a white uniform appeared directly in front of her car. She jerked the wheel sharply, the woman gave her a startled look and stumbled into the bushes and Diane, looking back, shaken, said, "Do you think she fell?" and Cole said, "No, but she deserved to, walking out in the road like that," and told her that she was now on Trowbridge Road, which was the dead end street along which ran Queenscourt and its neighbors, Westwind, Vair Hall and The Elms (Hildegard's house) in that order.

The land along Trowbridge Road was fairly level. A long meadow lay across from the big houses, which all had deep lawns in front and tall hedges, and behind the houses she could catch glimpses of a wooded area where Cole told her there were bridal paths.

There was a tall hedge that fronted the entire length of Queenscourt and as Diane swung the long white car through the gates and into the gravel drive, she saw that a man who

must be Ginny's Jeff on loan was already at work on it with hedge clippers. He was an old man, stooped, and he turned and nodded and Cole said with lively curiosity, "Don't tell me you've hired Jeff away from Ginny!"

She shook her head. "On loan," she said merrily, "to help me move in. And so is Cammie."

"There's Cammie now," said Cole. And Diane saw a gaunt gray-haired woman coming up the drive with a purposeful walk. She turned as she heard the car and Diane waved to her and swung around the circular drive with its heavy overhanging branches from the big oak trees that dotted the lawn and braked in front of the long imposing Tudor structure.

"The garage is thataway." Cole pointed to the far right of the building where a four-car garage with big dark wooden doors loomed.

"I just want to look at it," she said in wonderment, getting out and pushing back her blonde hair with both hands. "Cole, it's terrific!"

"It is that," he said without enthusiasm. "Yes, that's a very good word for Queenscourt. Terrific."

Before her stretched a long black marble slab behind which rose dark carved gothic double doors that came almost to a peak at the top. The house was very long, about 250 feet long, she guessed, including the four-car garage, and made basically of dark red brick with great sections that were half-timbered Tudor style with rough off-white stucco. There were many casement windows with leaded glass panes—which needed washing—and an irregular slate roof line that rose and fell according to the architect's whim. The whole effect was very handsome, and almost overwhelmingly large.

"It looks *old*," she said, studying it.

"Been in the MacQueen family for three generations before Duke got it," said Cole. "Why don't you open the door and go inside?"

Somehow she wasn't in a hurry to go in. She wanted to stand out here on the gravel drive with its great sweep of old oaks caressing the lawn, its tall hedge that made for privacy, and just admire it. The sleeping giant, at rest in the morning sun. She said so.

"Giantess," Cole corrected her lightly. "This was a woman's house. Lorna's. Duke only got it by marrying her."

She'd forgotten that this was Lorna's house, and was sorry that he'd reminded her.

She found the key to the front door on the ring with the others, and the door swung open on well-oiled hinges—Cobbie's work, she had no doubt. Before her stretched an enormous hallway, floored in black marble, richly paneled in dark wood and exceedingly gloomy, with great heavy dark beams criss-crossing the high ceiling. Halfway down in the gloom rose a carved gothic stairway with a large pointed newel post. All the woodwork was dark and the furniture was covered with dust covers so that the place seemed filled with lurking, crouching monsters draped in sheets who had frozen to immobility at their entrance.

Blithely, she threw open both doors to let the sunshine in.

"That's the first time both those doors have been open for a long time," Cole remarked.

Behind him the woman, Cammie, who had arrived at the front door, looked at her with open curiosity. "Mrs. Tarrant," she said stiffly, "Miss Ginny sent me. She thought you might use some help with the bathrooms and kitchen."

"Oh, I'd be very grateful, Cammie." Diane stepped aside to let her pass. "But I'm not sure the utilities are on yet. Perhaps you'd better turn on the water and see."

"Oh, the water was never turned off," said Cole promptly. "Try the lights. See if they're working."

Diane pressed a wall switch by the door. Nothing happened.

"Not yet," she said regretfully. "But I guess they will be soon."

She moved forward into the dim interior, hearing Cammie's footsteps echo ahead of her.

"She'll be heading for the first floor powder room, to clean it first," predicted Cole. "Cammie knows her way around here. She worked for the MacQueens for years, came to them as a girl." He grinned wickedly. "Rumor has it that Gar-net—the second Mrs. MacQueen—ejected her. For *cause*."

Diane looked down the hall where Cammie had disappeared with new interest. Could Cammie with her homely face and spare frame and faded blue eyes ever have been a swinger? She decided to cultivate Cammie—and learn about the family.

"Here, let me help you fold these dust covers," Cole of-

ferred congenially. "They're too big for one small girl to handle."

"Why, thank you, Cole." Diane was touched. Duke had more than one good friend around here, she told herself.

Prowling about, she learned that the trophy room and billiard room were on the left, separated by a wide hallway that was almost a room in itself that led through double arched doors to an enormous living room where she could glimpse heavy green brocade drapes that parted to reveal tall arched windows. Walking in, she discovered that the living room, with its pair of matching enormous pale green Kerman rugs and deep velvety furniture, its trio of glittering crystal chandeliers and numerous elaborate crystal wall brackets, stretched in dim splendor the full side of the extreme left of the house. The paneled library, a study, another smaller living room done in red leather and limed oak, and several other rooms were to the right, followed by the attached garage, while the back part of the house was occupied by a tremendous paneled and brocaded dining room, endless pantries, a bright attractive octagonal breakfast room, and an enormous kitchen that seemed to Diane's astonished eyes one great sweep of tile and stainless steel.

"It's big enough to feed a barracks," she gasped. And went back to inspect the long cavernous dining room again. She solemnly contemplated the awe-inspiring length of the gleaming mahogany table, the rows of handsome Queen Anne chairs, and tried to imagine giving a dinner party here without a maid.

Cole interrupted her thoughts. "Lorna used to give big parties in this house and invite the whole County." He cast a look up at the dark criss-crossed beams of the dining room. "These rafters rang with merriment," he said ironically.

Rather daunted, she let Cole lead her on her tour of the second floor. Major bedrooms at the front and sides, servants' quarters and backstairway at the rear. A long hallway that swept the length of the house. And a stair that led no doubt to the attic.

She exclaimed in delight over the huge corner bedroom above the living room, with its green satin drapes that lightly touched the pale green Kerman rug, the matching bedspread in green satin that was revealed when the dust cover was lifted from the Queensize bed with its curving tufted satin

headboard—that bed would be an improvement; in the islands Duke had always gotten rooms with twin beds—it would be nice to snuggle down in a big double bed at last, Virginia style. The drapes were closed and when Cole pulled the cord and they swept open, letting sunlight pour in through the casements, she could see the twined initials on that bedspread, “L. MacQ. T.”

“Lorna’s room,” said Cole. “You’ll want to change that bedspread, no doubt.”

Very discerning of him. Still, she challenged him, amused, “You’re sure about that?”

“Oh, they all did,” he said. And stopped and frowned. “Shall I fold it up for you?”

“Later,” she said crisply. Let him realize right now she wasn’t sensitive about Lorna. “All *who* did?”

“You are not the first beautiful blonde to try to take over here,” he said. “I would not be a friend if I said you were.”

Chapter 7

She stopped dead and looked at him. "You mean, other women actually moved in here after Lorna died?"

"That's not quite what I meant," he said uncomfortably. Duke had house guests a couple of times, that's all. It didn't work out."

Having completed that confusing statement, he seemed perfectly satisfied. "Duke's room is next door." With a thumb he indicated a connecting door.

Separate rooms! She gave it a mutinous look.

Cammie appeared silently at the hall door. "There's a man downstairs from the phone company. Wants to know where you want the phones."

"The phones are all in," said Cole. Diane was relieved; she didn't want any more expense than necessary, but she couldn't very well say that. "I'll go down and straighten him out," said Cole, and marched away, whistling.

He was gone a long time. She wandered down the long corridor, finally arriving at the hall windows that looked out over the rear of the property. To the left, half hidden by trees and shrubbery, was the now deserted stable, a matching edifice of dark brick, half-timbered like the house. Past the lawn—which was shallow here—the woods began, and from this upstairs window Diane looked out with delight on a summer vista of cool green branches waving in the wind. Sycamore, hickory, oak, elm—she felt a sudden rush of nostalgia for Virginia and that blithe carefree young Diane who had ridden through the green rolling countryside on lovely summer mornings like this one.

A flash of something reached her through the branches, and she peered at it, trying to make it out. It was the figure of a woman, she decided, sitting motionless astride a big black horse, staring up through the trees at the house.

Cole had told her there were bridle paths back there in the woods, she told herself, and would have turned away. But there was something purposeful about the silent scan of the woman on the big horse that arrested her. Almost as if she were reconnoitering. . . . Diane brushed the thought aside. Queenscourt, from any angle, was a very handsome pile of bricks. What more natural than for passersby to admire it?

She heard Cole's voice calling "Diane," turned to call "I'm back here," and when she turned again to the window the figure was gone.

Frowning a little, she went back to Cole, who was in the bedroom they had left.

"I got the phone man squared away. He was sure you'd want princess phones installed in all colors, but I said no, time enough for that later when you were sure what colors you'd want. And I've unstuck the door to the wine cellar. Now you're in booze again."

"Good," she said absently. Now she noticed there was a white phone on the handsome marble-topped commode by Lorna's bed. She assumed there was one in Duke's room too. She went over and looked. Except that it was not a corner room and was done in golden tan with a great beige Kerman rug on the floor and golden tan drapes, the room was almost a duplicate of Lorna's.

"They had the same decorator, I see," she said carelessly, determined to show him she wasn't sensitive about Lorna. These people had all known Lorna; this had been Lorna's house—so be it. Now it was hers.

"Lorna did her own decorating," said Cole. "All that you see is the work of her hand."

"And Duke's money," she laughed.

"And *her* money," he corrected her quietly. "Lorna was at least as rich as Duke. Maybe richer."

Diane's eyes widened. Somehow she hadn't thought it was like that. She had thought of Lorna as supplying the big house and Duke as supplying the money. But the picture that was emerging was somewhat different. Lorna, it seemed, had lacked for nothing, and Duke had been made doubly rich by her death.

Outside in the great long hall the lights went on.

"Well," said Cole cheerfully, "I see the electricians have done their duty. Come sit on the bed with me and I'll show

you a little trick." She raised her eyebrows and he laughed. "See, you're lying here in bed and you want to turn the light on." He bent over her. "Lift your hand so." He took her wrist, raised her hand. His smiling face was very close; she felt her pulse quicken. "And—presto—the light goes on."

It did actually go on.

"How does that work?" asked Diane a little breathlessly.

"With the current on, there's a beam right there across the top of the bed. All you have to do is break it and the light goes on. It's the same in both rooms—Duke's and Lorna's."

"Duke's and *mine*," she corrected him evenly, and he put her wrist down gently.

"That's right," he said. "You're the lady of the manor now."

A light voice from the doorway said, "What a touching little tableau."

Diane whirled to see Ginny standing in the doorway, holding a mop. She got up fast, color rising in her sensitive face. Ginny's luminous gray eyes were mocking, as if to say, *Cole's up to his old tricks with the girls!*

"I thought you might need this." Ginny thrust the mop forward. "Cammie left without one. I couldn't find her downstairs. A departing electrician let me in."

"She's probably exploring the wine cellar," said Cole, "now that I've unstuck the door for her."

Ginny's little smile said, *And what were you unsticking up here?*

Diane seized the mop. "That's very thoughtful of you, Ginny," she stammered. "Cole was just showing me the way the headboard light works. That beam thing."

"Duke had that installed," said Ginny. "Very clever, isn't it? I mean, in case a burglar has you by the throat, you can wave your arm and have a good look at him before he strangles you." Ginny's bantering words were for Diane, but her eyes on Cole were challenging.

"Now there's a nasty thought, Ginny," laughed Cole. "Take care, you'll frighten the bride."

"Not this bride," said Ginny. "She's opening up Queenscourt as a *surprise* for Duke."

Cole's jaw dropped. There was a mixture of expressions on his handsome face as he turned to Diane, but primary among

them was amusement. He burst into a guffaw. "That'll certainly surprise him."

"I thought you'd be interested," said Ginny composedly. "And since we're friends and neighbors, we must help her along. Mustn't we?"

"We must indeed. I volunteered for dust cover duty. What's your role?"

"I'm having you both for lunch," said Ginny. "And in the afternoon I shall have a go at washing up Lorna's Royal Doulton—that china she so rarely let anyone touch!"

"Don't break a plate," warned Cole.

"I won't. She'd be on me in a trice!" laughed Ginny. "Whatever a trice is!"

Diane shivered. They both spoke as if Lorna were still alive.

"Where is Lorna buried?" she asked abruptly.

"In the town cemetery," said Ginny, surprised.

"Brought there in a large hearse with hundreds of weeping mourners. Us among them. And enough flowers to start a fair-sized florist," said Cole. He lit a cigarette. "Shall we get on with the dust covers, ladies? I am only available mornings. Afternoons I rest on my patio and merely yawn at all the activity that takes place across the hedge at Ginny's."

Diane was reminded again that Cole's Vair Hall was the house two doors down and Ginny's Westwind was right next door. If Lorna had left her bedroom lights on and the drapes undrawn, she thought, Ginny or any guests of Ginny's could have seen her undressing through her bedroom windows at night—or anything else that went on in the room. And looking at Cole now, she rather thought he had. Well, *she* would be very careful to draw those drapes at night, that was for sure.

She tried making friends with Cammie, but met with a wall of reserve. All she learned was that it was "a lot more restful working for Miss Ginny" than it had been at Queenscourt, and a certain surprise that nothing had been changed. Why? wondered Diane. Had Cammie expected a frenzy of redecorating after her departure?

Once that morning she turned from polishing the rosewood back of a needlepoint chair and asked Ginny, "What does Cole do?"

For a moment Ginny looked nonplussed. "Do? Why, he—"

And at that moment Cole came into the room behind them and said lightly, "I lie upon my patio with a tall glass clinking in my hand, thinking up ways to squander the funds with which my no-good father left me so richly endowed!"

"Cole," murmured Ginny chidingly.

He flung her a challenging glance. "Care to deny it?"

Ginny shrugged but Diane's cheeks were pink as Cole went on, plainly needling Ginny. "I was brought up to be the crown prince of Vair Iron Works, meant to follow in the old man's iron footsteps—the king is dead; long live the king, and all that. Can't tell you how much good it did me to chuck it all and watch the old man's hopes rust away."

"He loved you, Cole," said Ginny in a bleak voice. "He only wanted to see you sitting at the head of a gleaming conference table, banging down the gavel—Coleman Vair, Chairman of the Board . . . as *he* had been, as your grandfather had been."

Diane turned quickly away at Cole's harsh laugh. "*Love*," he muttered scornfully. "He didn't know the meaning of the word. He was weak and a fool. He deserved what he got. . . ."

And what was that? Diane wondered.

"I liked your father," said Ginny rather sharply.

"You were taken in by his bluff hearty manner," he said, but his voice had lost its sting. In a mercurial change of mood he had recovered his good humor and lounged beside them exuding a rakish charm when, at lunchtime, Ginny swept them both over to Westwind, which was a Mount Vernon style Colonial with a long verandah across the front and square columns. Inside the woodwork was painted white and there was a large round reception hall with a curving stair that swept up on either side and joined with a sort of balcony at the top.

"Ginny, how lovely!" breathed Diane.

"Oh, it's very nice, and it's only about half the size of Queenscourt," said Ginny. "Much easier to maintain."

"And my little nest is even smaller. You must light there sometime." Cole waved an arm down the road where Diane had glimpsed Vair Hall, a big square red brick almost totally covered with ivy. "It's the oldest of the lot," he informed her.

"The Vairs and the Franklyns have been here since the

Year One," Ginny explained over lunch in her attractive blue and white dining room. "Do have some more chicken salad."

"Next came the MacQueens and then the Westcotts, and after that the Harrises—they bought the old Franklyn place; it's the next house after mine," supplied Cole. "A Normandy. Stucco. Tan. Should be white like a wedding cake."

At Diane's surprised look, Ginny laughed. "Hilde and Ben are the great love affair of Trowbridge Road. Ben was wildly in love with another girl back East and when she married someone else he tried to commit suicide. With a lot of little white pills. Hilde fed him coffee and good advice and kept him walking until the doctor got there. And got him on the rebound. She's passionately devoted to Ben. I think she'd fold up and die if he left her. Cole finds it hilarious—homely Hilde with grown daughters still swooning over her own husband." She turned to Cole. "Have some more chicken salad, Cole. Diane isn't interested in the genealogy of Trowbridge Road."

"Oh, but I am," protested Diane. "Everything here interests me." She smiled ingenuously at Cole. "I want to learn all about everything."

"You will," said Ginny grimly. "Soon enough." She looked up in surprise, her eyes trained on the open doorway behind Diane. "Uncle Trench, you shouldn't be out of bed!"

Diane turned to see a bright-eyed old man in a wheelchair come trundling into the room. He made the turn at the doorway at what must have been a reckless pace for that form of conveyance.

"Don't tell *me* when to go to bed, Missie!" he said tartly. "Or I'll turn you over my knee!"

Diane blinked.

Ginny said, "Diane, this is Uncle Trench. Uncle Trench, this is Duke's new wife."

Uncle Trench stared at Diane from under bushy white eyebrows. His bony hands gripped the arms of the wheelchair, and his whole skinny body seemed to come to attention.

"So you're the bride everybody's talking about," he said, and Ginny murmured, "Uncle *Trench*!"

"Like you better than the last one," he said bluntly. "Better than that Lorna MacQueen!"

Embarrassed, Diane murmured a greeting.

"Where is that Allerton woman?" Ginny sounded irritated.

"Gave her the slip," chuckled Uncle Trench. "Zipped down in the elevator when she wasn't looking." Diane was abruptly reminded of the wealth that existed on Trowbridge Road. Westwind, though only two stories, had its own elevator. He turned his little bright eyes on Diane. "She's my keeper—they call her my nurse, but when you're old, they give you a keeper!"

A buxom woman in a white uniform appeared in the doorway Uncle Trench had vacated. She was big and gray-haired and looked harassed. Diane recognized her at once as the woman she had nearly run down with her car this morning.

"Oh, *there* you are, Mr. Westcott," she scolded. "You come right back up to your room." She turned to Ginny. "I've had such a morning, Miss Westcott. First some wild driver nearly ran me down when I took my morning constitutional. . . ." Her voice trailed off as she met the "wild driver's" blue eyes across the table and Cole choked back laughter.

Ginny said with a frown, "Were you walking down Trowbridge Road again, Nora? You should watch out for the turn. I told you there was a woman killed at that turn. Hit by a car."

Diane leaned forward contritely. "I'm terribly sorry I ran you off the road," she apologized. "Normally I don't take turns at that speed, but you loomed up in front of me right after Cole told me to turn. I do hope you weren't hurt."

"Oh, was it you?" Ginny sounded surprised, and Nora Allerton looked upset and muttered, "No, I only tore my stockings in the bushes as I left the road." Her expression said, *Wild drivers, watch out for them*. She turned her attention back to Uncle Trench. "You know the doctor said you should rest in bed today, Mr. Westcott, or your cold might get worse!"

"Doctors!" scoffed Uncle Trench. "Fools, all of them! Want to stay down here and talk to the bride."

"Uncle Trench," pleaded Ginny, "do let Nora take you back to your room. You're exciting yourself."

"No." Uncle Trench thrust out his lower lip.

"I'll come and play checkers with you later if you do," said Ginny in a wheedling voice.

He sat up straighter. "Three games," he warned. "No less than three games, you hear, Missie?"

"Three games," promised Ginny.

They watched Nora Allerton's bulky back as she lumbered out of the room wheeling Uncle Trench. "I'll be seeing you," he called to Diane from the door. "From my window I can see right into your bedroom, if you take the same room the other one did. I'll wave at you!"

GINNY laughed as Uncle Trench and Nora Allerton disappeared from view. "He means it! Better keep your shades drawn!"

"I'll do that," smiled Diane.

"He's a wicked old coot," said Cole. "Sort of a Senior Citizen Peeping Tom, if you know what I mean. Used to bring women here, before he got so crippled up. Ginny'd have to clear them out."

"Don't recall those bad old days to me, Cole," laughed Ginny. "Uncle Trench is past it now, I hope! He used to go out on regular benders about once a week. Looking back, I don't know how I lived through it."

"He didn't like my predecessor," murmured Diane.

"Oh, Lorna probably resisted his advances," said Ginny carelessly, "at some point in his reckless career!"

"You mean she knocked his reputation as a Dirty Old Man out of kilter?" demanded Cole.

"Well, he was a devil with the ladies, you'll remember. I've heard hair-raising stories about his heyday, when he and Latham Franklyn used to bring home women and Emmeline Franklyn had to lock herself in her room while the party raged through the house all night. They used to live at The Elms, you know, built themselves a new house on the property when the old one burned. But as soon as Latham had his stroke, Emmeline moved into town. I guess she had bad memories of the place! You'll meet her. She's a fierce old dowager who runs everything her own way."

"Emmeline Franklyn," Cole winked at Diane, "sleeps with her chauffeur."

"Cole," protested Ginny, laughing, "you must stop saying that. Barnaby is the most devoted—"

"That's what I said." Cole's face was bland.

"She could sue you for defamation of character. Just because she got rid of the rest of the servants when she moved to town and took Barnaby with her! She probably just wanted a new staff that didn't remember her husband's shenanigans."

"I capitulate," said Cole with a mock bow. "Emmeline

Franklyn does *not* sleep with her chauffeur. She just wants to."

How adroitly Ginny and Cole had turned the conversation away from Lorna, thought Diane. As if there were things she shouldn't hear.

"That woman who was run down by a car at the turn on Trowbridge Road," she asked idly. "Was it recent?"

"Oh, no," said Cole. "Happened years ago."

"It was Garnet MacQueen," said Ginny, and something in Ginny's voice made Diane look at her alertly. "Lorna's stepmother."

"Stepmother?" Diane looked confused.

"After his first wife, Marnie MacQueen, died, Ronald MacQueen had no better taste than to marry her red-headed sister Garnet," said Cole. "A hit and run driver got her at the corner of Trowbridge Road one summer day. They never knew who it was."

That thick foliage . . . Diane thought how close she'd come to hitting Nora Allerton there and shuddered. She'd remember to be very careful of that turn.

"You've noticed there's an elevator here," Cole said to Diane. "It represents a compromise. After Uncle Trench was confined to his wheelchair, Ginny had to restrain him from tearing out the main stairway and installing a sort of loop-the-loop roller coaster kind of ramp that he could scoot down on his wheelchair under his own power!"

"He'd have killed himself on that thing, Cole," protested Ginny. "Not to mention that it would have ruined the hall."

"So you see what we mean about Uncle Trench," grinned Cole. "He's a catbird, all right."

A catbird . . . who hated Lorna. It might be illuminating to talk to Uncle Trench alone.

"He'd calmed down by the time you arrived on the scene, Ginny," added Cole. "My old man assured me in a confiding moment that all the really wild parties were held down at The Elms. While Emmeline quivered in her bed!"

"I'd hate to think they were any wilder than he had here," said Ginny ruefully.

After lunch, Diane went back to her endeavors to make Queenscourt livable, folding up dust covers with Cole's help, polishing, endlessly polishing. And then, because its opulence fascinated her, she used a folding ladder that was there

for the purpose and climbed up to survey the top shelves of the gigantic walk-in linen closet on the second floor. She counted, sorted—and marvelled. Here were piles and piles of magnificent linens, thick soft towels, fluffy washcloths, all monogrammed “L. MacQ. T.” Either Lorna had casually tossed out what she had before, or had everything remonogrammed after her marriage. Irish linen, soft percale, fine embroidery and eyelet, heavy satin spreads and lace pillow shams so fragile she hesitated to touch them. She fingered them lovingly.

From the back of one of the shelves of the linen closet she pulled out a little pink satin pillow with a ribald message painted on the satin, and stared at it, surprised. It seemed so out of place here.

“Finding any goodies?” asked a bored voice from the hall and she turned to find Ginny watching her through the open linen closet door.

“I found this,” said Diane, frowning, climbing down off the ladder.

Ginny peered at it. “Now *there* is something we don’t need,” she said energetically. “It belonged undoubtedly to Garnet—Ronald MacQueen’s second wife. There was a coarse side to her nature. This is just the sort of thing she’d think amusing!”

“I wonder Lorna didn’t pitch it out after Garnet died,” said Diane with distaste, joining Ginny in the hall.

“Oh, she would have undoubtedly, but obviously she didn’t find it, stuck away back here. Cammie would have gotten rid of it, but she didn’t work here then.”

“Cole hinted that Garnet fired Cammie because she and Ronald MacQueen were a bit too friendly.”

“Nonsense,” said Ginny, dropping the offending pillow into a paper box she was carrying. “It was entirely one-sided. Cammie worshipped the ground Ronald MacQueen walked on. He didn’t know she was alive. But it irked Garnet, seeing all that adoration in Cammie’s eyes. I guess she wanted servants who had their first loyalty to *her*, not to Ronald. So one day she found Cammie in Ronald’s bedroom with some papers in her hand—all perfectly innocent, Cammie was merely cleaning up—and accused Cammie of peeking into their private papers, spying on them, reading their mail. She *said* she

found some of her letters in Cammie's room, but I never believed that."

Having seen Cammie, Diane didn't believe it either. There was something staunch and upright about the old woman.

"So she fired Cammie, threw her out. On the spot. No notice or anything. And what do you know?" Ginny's laugh tinkled. "The very next day Garnet MacQueen died. Got run over. Hit and run at the corner of Trowbridge Road."

Fired . . . and the very next day Garnet died.

"Does Cammie drive?" Diane asked before she could stop herself.

Ginny gave her a surprised look. "Of course not. She had terrible eyesight. You must have noticed the way she *peers* at things—won't wear glasses. But in answer to what you're thinking—" her voice hardened—"Cammie wouldn't be capable of doing anything like that. She's more of a victim type."

Diane flushed. She hadn't meant to indict Cammie. The words had just burst out unbidden. She must learn to guard her tongue.

"Poor Cammie," said Ginny and there was real compassion in her voice. "She's a born mother, but she never had a chance. She was the only homely girl in a family of pretty women. The others took all her boy friends. So she came to Queenscourt to work. There was never any motherliness in *this* house. I guess Cammie was more of a mother to Lorna than her real mother Marnie ever was."

"Did Lorna feel like Cammie was her mother?"

"Well, who ever knew how Lorna felt?" demanded Ginny. "But she ran to Cammie sometimes when things got bad at Queenscourt."

"A crying child runs to the one it considers its mother," murmured Diane.

"Lorna," stated Ginny, "*never* wept. I saw her take a fall off a horse that would have broken an ordinary mortal in half. No tears. I saw Garnet's hand lash across her face one day so hard Lorna's head snapped back. Lorna turned white but she didn't cry. I saw her when her mother died and her father. Dry-eyed all the way. Lorna was *never* a crying child."

With that Ginny went back downstairs, and washed dishes and crystal until she tired and gave up, saying she was late to one of Emmeline Franklyn's tiresome committee meetings.

To which Cole, bustling through with his arms full of boxes, said, "Well, that's a command performance! Don't dare be late or the royal old witch will have your hide!"

GINNY laughed, but when Cole had gone, marching through the kitchen on his way to the trash bin outside, Diane turned and asked frankly, "What's Cole got against Emmeline Franklyn?"

GINNY said ruefully, "Emmeline thought the world of Cole's father. She can't forgive Cole for not following in his footsteps, becoming a captain of industry. She *patronizes* him and it maddens Cole. He strikes back by making cracks about her."

"Well, after all," said Diane, "there should be room in the world for people who aren't captains of industry as well as those who are!"

"That," said Ginny incisively, "is precisely my opinion," and took off. Cammie and Jeff left, presumably for more pressing duties at Westwind. Diane kept on, hearing Cole's snatches of song as he carried out empty cartons to the trash bin.

Once he paused to tell her appreciatively that beautiful women had always lived in this house: dark Marnie MacQueen had been pretty as a picture and red-haired Garnet almost as good looking, while Lorna . . . his wistful expression implied she'd been the best of the lot. "And now you. . . ." he said roguishly. "The fragile blue-eyed blonde."

"Aren't there any portraits of them?" she asked curiously. She was familiar with the big portrait of Ronald MacQueen over the marble fireplace in the library, but where were the portraits in oils of these beautiful women who had reigned here like monarchs?

Cole shrugged. "Lorna said she didn't like a lot of other women staring down at her from the walls."

Diane stared. "But her mother's portrait? And her aunt's—the one who became her stepmother? She *removed* them?"

Cole's eyes glinted. "Would you believe it?" he said lazily. "She burned them in the fireplace one nippy October evening. She was redecorating and the painting clashed with her new color scheme." And to Diane's gasp of astonishment, "I brought over a portrait of my old man that had been glaring at me from the library mantel since time immemorial and

added it to her bonfire. Collectively, they made quite a blaze."

As they had in life no doubt. . . . Diane thought about that. A new view of Lorna was emerging. A woman who had casually burned her mother's and her stepmother's portraits.

"It was a real flaunting of convention," he added lightly, "since they were all painted by eminent American artists. We sat there and toasted the embers with brandy . . . and talked about Cleopatra dissolving pearls in the wine she gave Anthony."

Lorna the delinquent, thought Diane. Reckless, rebellious. Cole admitted to hating his father but. . . . "Did Lorna hate them both so much?" she wondered aloud.

"Yes," said Cole. "She did." And then abruptly, "Lorna didn't have it easy at Queenscourt, you know, when she was growing up. She told me once, with her fists clenched, that it was Garnet or her, that both of them wouldn't live out the year." He stopped as if he had said too much.

"And was that the year Garnet . . . left us?" asked Diane quietly.

"Yes." He smiled. "Doesn't fate have a way of taking care of things? After that, I called her 'Lorna the Lucky.' She'd hated Garnet and the winds of fate blew Garnet away one fine summer afternoon."

The winds of fate. . . . Diane turned away somberly. The winds of fate had blown her to Queenscourt.

Chapter 8

In late afternoon Hildegard dropped in, saw Diane was flagging, told Cole to go home, and took over. She dragged Diane home with her to dinner, bag and baggage, and insisted she spend the night. ("You can't stay rattling around in that big house all alone.")

Diane was glad. She was tired and somehow Queenscourt seemed successively less friendly as the shadows lengthened. It was the size, she told herself nervously, the enormous larger-than-life size of the place. It increased the feeling of gloom in those shadowed, lofty-ceilinged rooms.

"I met Ginny's Uncle Trench at lunch today," she told Hildegard as they drove toward The Elms ("Every place has an 'Elms'; the Harrises happen to own The Elms of Trowbridge Road," Hildegard had laughingly told Diane.) "How old is he?"

"Uncle Trench?" Hildegard laughed. "Older than time. He gives poor Ginny a hard time. He's supposed to take sedatives, you know, and she suspects him of slipping them into Nora Allerton's fruit juice—which she drinks continuously—so she'll doze off and he can roam about. She's afraid he'll get hurt, wandering around. He fancies himself a wicked old chaser—but he's harmless."

"It's nice of Ginny to take him in and care for him," said Diane, thinking it couldn't be very pleasant to hear constantly the kind of remarks the old man made.

"Oh, it isn't like that," said Hildegard. "It's the other way around. He took *her* in. You see, the house is his."

Diane blinked.

"Oh, not that Ginny's any poor waif. She's a rich woman in her own right. But her parents died when she was a tot, and since Trencherton Westcott was her only living relative, he brought her to Westwind and she's been here ever since."

Diane shivered. "I'm not sure I'd want to be brought up by that—"

"By that old ghou? Oh, Uncle Trench is all right. He just tries to shock people. Thinks it makes him attractive. He's getting pretty senile and sometimes Ginny has her hands full with him. But they're really very fond of each other."

Yes, Trowbridge Road was a close knit little operation. Everyone seemed extremely fond of each other. But nothing, it seemed, was quite the way it appeared on the surface.

"We're so glad Duke decided to open Queenscourt," said Hildegard. "Just driving by that great big empty pile at night always gave me the creeps. It stared at me *sightlessly*, if you know what I mean. It will be good to see lights there."

"Duke doesn't know I'm opening Queenscourt. I'm doing it to surprise him."

Hildegard almost lost control of the car. "Duke doesn't know?" she gasped. "Are you sure that's wise, Diane?"

"Why, of course, I'm sure." Diane was beginning to feel a little irritated with the denizens of Trowbridge Road. She was Duke's new wife. What more natural than that she should open up their house there. "Why on earth shouldn't I?"

"Well, it's just—the things that happened there," stuttered Hildegard.

"You mean Lorna's dying there?" asked Diane bluntly.

Hildegard had a hunted look. Her hands gripped the wheel. "No, I mean—afterward. I mean Stella and . . . and Cornelia."

"Stella? Cornelia? Who were they?"

"Oh, you shouldn't ask me," said Hildegard. "I do run on so. Why can't I keep my big mouth shut? Here we are. Ben can't wait to show you around. The stables are out back, you know. And there's one of our local landmarks—see that big elm with the branches gone on one side. It's sort of lopsided now, but I can't bear to have it cut down. They tell me it caught fire when the old house went, but they were able to put it out and save it—the tree, that is, not the house. I'm glad they did, it shades the front exactly right doesn't it?"

They were walking under that shade as she rattled on desperately, giving Diane no chance to say anything.

"And here's my darling!" cried Hilde, throwing her arms rapturously around a big wolfhound who jumped up to greet her. "I call him 'Lover Boy' because he's fathered half the

little mongrels in the neighborhood. Ben says we should do something about him but I won't hear of it. Think of the fun he's having!"

Diane let herself be propelled through the creamy front door with its wrought iron knocker, shook Ben Harris' big hand in the handsome foyer floored with black and white marble. Ben was a tall man, Duke's size, with iron gray hair and a steady look. His eyes, she thought, were rather sad. She gazed past him at the curving stairway with its handsome brass and iron railing. She liked Normandy houses. But it was hard to concentrate on the decor right now; she could almost feel hysteria oozing out of Hildegard.

"Dinner's almost ready. Clayton will bring in your things while Ben mixes us a drink." Hilde seated Diane in her attractive gold and orange living room with its French Provincial furniture and almost overpowered her with small talk. About their two daughters, Trina and Trix, who were spending the summer in Europe and would be home in the fall. About horses, and the Country Club, and the boat they were thinking of buying. About everything but Stella and Cornelia.

Almost hysterically, she thrust a big leather album at Diane and together they pored over pictures that ranged from Hilde's immediate family to in-laws and great aunts, photos going back into the twenties, with women in short skirts and spangles, and one particular photo of a handsome great-aunt with a sweeping hat that overpowered the scene. Diane smiled as beside her Hilde leafed through the pages, getting a little misty eyed over pictures of her mother. Ben looked a little perplexed and resisted Hilde's efforts to drag him into this conversational bombardment.

In the long dining room with its yellow rough plaster walls and matching corner cupboards and sideboard that had "come over on a boat from England in a day when they made furniture the right way, with *care*," facing Ben and Hilde across their heavy trestle table and being served Rock Cornish hen and peas and mashed potatoes and tiny fluffy biscuits on Spode plates, Diane felt relaxed at last. They were both so nice, Hilde and Ben, so warm. More good friends.

"If there's anything we can do, anything we can tell you, just let us know," said Ben, and obviously meant it.

"Well, there is one thing. . . ." Diane picked up a biscuit. "You could tell me who Cornelia is. And Stella."

Hilde dropped her fork with a clatter. "I'm afraid I mentioned them, Ben," she said in a tragic voice.

"*Hilde!*" Ben sounded shocked.

"It's just that I keep hearing their names," said Diane, gazing steadily at her host.

Ben cleared his throat. He sat a little straighter. "Cornelia Harrington and Stella Tremayne," he said carefully. "We all knew them while they were here."

"They were visitors then?"

Hildegard leaned forward. "Oh, let's stop this pussyfooting. *I'll tell you*, Diane. Only, for heaven's sake, don't let Duke know where you found out."

"I won't."

"After Lorna died, Duke played the field. A man alone, you know. He ran around a lot with Stella Tremayne—she's very pretty, a cousin of Clive Vandervoort's; you met him last night at the Club. And one day she was over at Queenscourt; they were playing billiards, and Duke was called out. He told Stella to wait, he'd be back as soon as he could. She curled up on the sofa and went to sleep. He didn't get back. When she woke it was dark. She—she said somebody tried to strangle her with a stocking. She got away, screaming, and told the story all over. She said—"

"She said it was Lorna," groaned Ben. "Tell it like it was."

"But Lorna was dead then," protested Diane, her scalp prickling.

"Of course," said Hildegard. "And besides it was dark and Stella couldn't see whoever it was. But she said as the stocking went round her neck she smelled Lorna's perfume—it's a distinctive blend Lorna had made up specially. Anyway, Stella fought her way out screaming and called the police and they could see no signs of a break-in whatever, and suggested she might have been having a nightmare."

"In short," said Ben with a stern look at his wife, "Stella spread the word the house was haunted. By Lorna."

"And of course it was well known," added Hildegard, "that Lorna always bragged 'No other woman will ever live in Queenscourt but me.'"

"Oh," said Diane.

"And the story sort of gathered strength as it went along, and it was blown up into all sorts of things. Lights seen in the windows at night when there was nobody home. Shadows

against the glass. The figure of a woman. Ghostly sounds. You know, *that* sort of thing."

"Of course, we don't believe a word of it," said Ben quickly.

"No, of course not," said Diane. "But who was Cornelia?"

The Harrises looked at each other across the table, hopelessly.

"Well," said Ben, with a hunted look, "that's rather a long story."

"I'll only find it out from somebody else," pointed out Diane. "I'd much rather you told me."

"Cornelia was Duke's next girl friend, after Stella," Hildegard plunged on. "She claimed they were engaged although Duke never confirmed or denied it. She'd heard all the stories and boasted *she* wasn't afraid of Queenscourt; and one day she filched the key to the front door from Duke's pocket and when he went out of town that same afternoon, Cornelia boasted she was going out and 'lay' the ghost at Queenscourt. It was at the Country Club she said it; I was sitting right there beside her in the bar. And someone dared her—I think it was Kitty—to spend the night alone at Queenscourt, since everyone knew Duke wouldn't be back until the next night, and Cornelia lifted up her head and said, 'All right, I will!' And away she went. That was about ten o'clock. . . ." Her voice trailed off.

Diane leaned forward.

"Ben and I were at the Club that night rather late. Going home we were planning to drop in and see if Cornelia was all right. We never got the chance. We heard a crash as we turned the corner at Trowbridge Road—a truck going through the guardrail up on the superhighway. The driver said later that a woman had darted into the road and run right in front of his truck and he swerved and went through the guardrail to miss her. Said she was in full view of his headlights and he'd never seen anyone look so frightened. Well, he missed her, but the next car smashed right into her. There wasn't much of her left to scrape up."

Diane gripped the stem of her water glass rather hard. "I see why you didn't want to tell me," she said slowly.

"Yes," sighed Hildegard. "It was a little while after that that Duke pulled up stakes and left."

"Speculation had it that he felt he couldn't bring a wife to

Queenscourt," said Ben, as if anxious to tell her everything at once, bring it all out into the open and get it over with.

"That Lorna—that *something*—wouldn't let him," said Hildegard simply. "That's why I was so surprised when you said you were opening up the place without Duke's knowledge."

"I'm very grateful that you told me," said Diane. *But maybe I'd have been happier not knowing.* . . . "What happened to Stella? Is she still around?"

"No, she went to New York and then, we heard, to Madrid. She seems to have dropped out of sight somewhere in Europe. Probably playing around somewhere with the Jet Set; she's a pretty wild sort. She'll turn up one day. But you can see," went on Hildegard earnestly, "that with Lorna dying there, and then Stella spreading those stories, and then Cornelia running out like that to her death—well, it gave Queenscourt a bad name. Duke couldn't rent it. He just let it sit. Probably you're doing the best thing, Diane, to open it up and lay all the old stories to rest. Why, as soon as you and Duke have given a party or two there, everybody will have forgotten all about those old stories. And with servants living in."

"Oh, I don't plan to have servants," said Diane quickly. "Ginny has kindly lent me two of hers for the cleanup operation, but after that—well, after all, there's only Duke and me. I love to cook. Yes, I think I'll just get by with occasional help."

Hilde looked troubled. "But that will mean that when Duke is gone you'll be there alone and—" *And do you think that's wise?* was the unspoken ending.

"I'm not afraid," said Diane, lifting her chin. She hoped she was telling the truth.

As if contrite that they'd scared her, both Ben and Hilde outdid themselves trying to entertain her after dinner. They carried their Spode coffee cups into the elaborate sunroom with its bright yellow chintz and comfortable Swedish modern furniture, and when she admired the room, Hilde said, "This was the Franklyn place, you know—well, not the original house. They built this one after that one burned down."

"Was burned down," supplied Ben. "Old Latham Franklyn had a pack of enemies. It was a very obvious case of arson, but no one ever found out who did it."

"He was promiscuous, the story goes," said Hilde. "Fa-

thered a lot of illegitimates, went with married women too. It was said he liked this place because it was located at the end of the road surrounded by trees—our famous elms for which the place is named—and he could have wild parties here cloaked from the world—while his wife locked herself in her room and pulled the covers up over her head.”

“How awful for her,” murmured Diane.

“Yes, wasn’t it? But it all happened long before we came here. When we arrived, the new house had risen from the ashes of the old, Latham Franklyn had just had a stroke, and Emmeline used that as an excuse to move into town. Yellow brick Victorian with a wall. He died a year later.”

“Probably Emmeline finds it more restful without him,” remarked Ben dryly.

“Emmeline’s only son is in the Foreign Service, never comes home,” said Hilde. “Actually Emmeline seldom goes out, but when she does it’s a sight to see. She has an ancient Rolls Royce and her long-time chauffeur Barnaby—he’s even older than she is—wears a russet uniform with a cap. She’ll send him in to ask if you are receiving. *Receiving!*” Hilde hooted. “And you’d better have sherry on hand because that’s all she drinks. She’ll have one glass of sherry and look you over and if you pass inspection she’ll invite you to serve on one of her charity committees—where she’ll systematically work you to death. That woman has no mercy. I have served on five of her committees, and she is a true Simon Legree!”

“She and Uncle Trench must be about the only two of that generation left around here,” said Diane.

“Oh, there’s a scattering,” said garrulous Hilde. “Most of them in nursing homes, or gone to live in Florida or California, or with grown children in the East or somewhere. But you must never mention Trencherton Westcott to her. She positively *hates* him.”

“He was her husband’s favorite crony and companion in crime,” said Ben with a wry quirk to his mouth, “and she can’t forgive him for that.”

“You’ll feel you’ve been through a meat grinder after talking to her for a while,” said Hilde. “At least I did, the first time. She couldn’t forgive me for not having local ancestors she could check up on!”

“She sounds like a local curiosity,” said Diane politely.

“She’s more of a local monument,” said Ben, his lips

twitching. "She has enormous wealth, although she's not particularly extravagant. She lives alone in a big house with only servants to talk to. All her relatives are down South—she comes from Alabama. Her only son is married and gone, battling around here and there with the Foreign Service. Emmeline hates to travel and won't visit him; he's busy and can't come here—scuttlebutt has it he's bucking to be Secretary of State one day and to that end is poking his finger into assorted U. S. leaky dykes around the world."

"Emmeline's very proud of him," broke in Hilde, "but apparently they never saw much of each other except when he was a tot. She packed him off to private boarding schools around the country almost before he was out of rompers, had him educated at Oxford and some diplomatic school near Washington—well away from Latham Franklyn's sphere of influence."

"Emmeline's a lonely woman," said Ben with a chiding look at his wife. "And powerful. It's advisable to be nice to her even if she is a little hard to take sometimes."

"Oh, I'm *nice* to her, Ben," sighed Hilde. "She just isn't my type. Cold, dominating—*overpowering* in fact. You'll meet her soon, Diane. If you live in MacQueensport it's unavoidable."

"A lonely woman," repeated Ben quietly. "With only servants for company."

"*And* her committee members, don't forget," said Hilde tartly. "We go and report like little soldiers to that woman. I wouldn't have believed *anyone* could have such a commanding personality!" She stared into her coffee cup, perplexed.

Like Lorna grown old, thought Diane suddenly. Commanding everything, everyone to do her bidding. But Lorna hadn't grown old. She had died while she was still young and wild and beautiful, and that was the way she would always be remembered.

"How did Emmeline feel about Lorna?" she asked suddenly.

Hilde looked uncomfortable. "I think she liked Lorna," she said frankly, "though she could never get Lorna to serve on her committees."

"You've only known her in her latter years. You don't know who she liked," reproved Ben, putting down his cup.

"That's true," said Hilde. "Still. . . ."

Still my predecessor had her stamp of approval, thought Diane grimly. *It remains to be seen whether I will.*

But it gave her something to think about as she lay that night, not sleeping, in the big soft tester bed in Hilde's blue-paneled guest room and stared at the ruffled curtains that blew lightly in the open window. Was Queenscourt some great Pandora's Box that she had opened? And if so, what would fly out? She huddled down under the soft percale sheet with its tiny blue forget-me-nots.

And where did Lorna sleep tonight? she asked herself. Under a white marble slab in the town cemetery or—*No, stop it*, she told herself sternly. *All this talk is beginning to get to you. Queenscourt is just a house, like other houses. Only bigger and perhaps a bit more gloomy because of its size. You will break it to your hand, all right.*

On that comforting note, she fell asleep.

She awoke to a whole new ball game. Cole came over at breakfast time waving a bottle of champagne, saying gaily that they should "christen" Queenscourt anew by breaking a bottle over the front door knocker.

Hildegard laughed and brought him in to breakfast—delicate little pancakes and hot buttery maple syrup served in her knotty pine breakfast room—and insisted she too was going to join the "Mop Brigade" today. Diane had the impression that the Harrises had had a heart to heart talk after she had gone to bed and decided that after having told her horror stories about Queenscourt at dinner, if anything happened to her it would be their fault and that must, on no account, happen. She felt she was watching a changing of the guard, being passed from hand to hand as it were. Watched. Protected.

"If Duke doesn't get back tonight, you must come back to us," said Hilde. She brushed aside Diane's protests. "We simply cannot take no for an answer, Diane. We will *not* let you stay there alone. It would, you see—" a smile played around the corners of her mouth—"interfere with our sleep."

"Of course, I could volunteer to stay there with you, offered Cole enthusiastically. "Sort of substitute for Duke in absentia as it were."

"You'll do nothing of the sort," said Hildegard, amused. "But we can use your strong back and weak mind in the Mop Brigade. Come along and bring lots of energy!"

Cole groaned. "I'm only strong-minded, not strong-muscled. A lover, not a fighter!"

A nut, said Hildegard's fond, friendly gaze as she drank her coffee. *But a nice one.*

Diane thought, I'll buy that. Cole's a talker, but he's good around the heart.

"Watch out for him, Diane," warned Hilde humorously. "He chases all the pretty girls."

Remembering this, once they were all at work at Queenscourt, Diane paused to smile at Cole, as she picked up a load of thick white and gold towels, some scented soap she had found in a cupboard, and tissue. She had decided somewhat reluctantly, that all the baths, even of unused rooms, should be ready for guests. It *looked* better, she thought, more affluent, one of many cloaks to their newfound poverty. And besides, they had lots of towels.

She went upstairs humming. What difference that the big stack of handsome towels she carried, like all the linens, bore the monogram "L. MacQ. T."? The Duke now had a new Duchess, even though, she told herself whimsically, a sort of do-it-yourself Duchess. But in time she'd learn to run Queenscourt with regal grace. As befitted the Steel Duke.

She hung towels in the various tile baths, admiring the white marble sinks and ornate hardware, and moved along the shadowed corridor until at last she reached the big windows overlooking the back of the property, the shallow lawn with the rippling green leaves of the woods behind it—and paused again to admire the view.

To her surprise, the same woman seemed to be sitting there astride her big black horse, motionless, surveying the house. Diane peered out, trying to get a better view, but she could only glimpse the figure in flashes as the wind ruffled the branches.

Somehow she didn't like that silent surveillance. She determined to open the window and get a better view of the watcher. To that end, she hurried to the nearest bedroom and dumped her load of remaining towels and soap and tissue on the bed, hurried back, flung open the window and leaned out.

But she was too late. The woman—if woman it had been, since it was more instinct than vision that had told Diane it was a woman out there—was gone.

Puzzled, Diane went back downstairs and asked Ginny,

who had joined them, "Did you see a woman riding by the back of the house just now?"

"No," said Ginny. "I didn't see anyone." She set down the Royal Doulton plate in her hands carefully and turned her luminous gaze on Hildegard. "Did you?"

Hilde shook her head. "They're not supposed to use these paths without permission since it's private property, but sometimes someone from the Club comes through beneath the underpass and rides down these bridal paths."

"Or some of the trash from the Extension," added Cole. "They use it. On foot or on any nag they can borrow or steal."

"Really, Cole, I wish you wouldn't say things like that," said Hilde, with irritation in her usually calm voice. "Some of those girls from the Extension have worked for me and they were very nice indeed."

"The Lingerly's," said Cole laconically.

"Yes, the Lingerly's are just who I had in mind." Hilde still sounded cross. "I was especially fond of Mattie Sue. She became almost like one of my daughters, when she worked for me, and I miss her now that she's gone."

Mattie Sue Lingerly . . . Duke's alibi for Lorna's death. Diane forgot the lone horsewoman. "Where has she gone?" she asked casually.

"Run off with some guy probably," said Cole. "She's a showy piece. Candy-box blonde."

Hilde gave him a look. "Mattie Sue was always yearning to go to Hollywood," she sighed. "After she left I found stacks of movie magazines stashed away in the kitchen. I'm afraid she probably ran off to California."

"Where she may not make her fortune, but she may make a few bucks," said Cole coarsely.

"I'd rather you didn't speak of Mattie Sue that way, Cole," said Hilde in such a frosty voice that he subsided.

"Hilde, Hilde," sighed Ginny. "You're much too easy going." And carried another stack of Royal Doulton to the kitchen.

From each of them she learned about the others:

Ginny, her arms deep in suds, told her frankly that they'd all been "a wild bunch," that Francie Pelton (Lorna's cousin who became her stepsister) had been expelled from five Eastern schools and would undoubtedly have been expelled

from a dozen more in the West and South except for her parents dying so close together, after which her guardian had given her up as a bad job and allowed her to travel. Which she'd done, jet-setting all over the world, collecting lovers and leopardskins in South Africa, lovers and race horses in Brazil, lovers and bulls' ears in Spain . . . none of which had ever meant anything to her.

She told Diane that Lorna had never had much formal education, that she'd taken French leave of the expensive finishing school she'd attended in California and never returned. She'd set herself up as the reigning hostess of MacQueensport instead.

And Cole told her that Ginny had gone away to school in New Orleans for only a semester before Trencherton Westcott had suffered the first of his many attacks and demanded her presence beside his querulous sickbed. Diane cast a compassionate look at Ginny through the kitchen door. She might have married, had children by now, but instead she was devoting her life to Uncle Trench, whose memory slipped in and out like a broken latch. But if Ginny regretted the passing years, you'd never know it. She held her head arrogantly and her luminous gaze was faintly scathing. Diane admired her.

In fact, she liked them all, she thought, standing in the long living room looking around her at the pleasant groupings of graceful divans and French gilt chairs with delicate legs, at olive green velvet upholstery and soft Chinese gold, at the softly gleaming Chinese gold brocade that reached above the rich dark wainscoting to make a glowing background for the heavy brass and crystal wall brackets that marched down the walls to complement the trio of enormous brass and crystal chandeliers that hung in splendor from the lofty ceiling. The long green damask drapes were open now over the tall arched windows and the morning sunlight brought to life the delicate beauty of the enormous matched pair of pale green Kerman rugs so thick and soft underfoot, and cast a sparkling glow on the tall mirrored fireplace with its elaborately carved stone mantel that dominated one wall. She looked from the long matching coffee tables and occasional tables of inlaid fruitwoods to the curving-fronted gilt and ebony French commodes with green veined marble tops that were spaced along the walls, supporting cloisonné and Chinese

vases, delicate statuary—and marvelled that all this should be hers, she, Diane Forrest who had never in her life dreamed of possessing such things . . . no, not Diane Forrest, she reminded herself, Diane Tarrant, wife to the Steel Duke whose strong hands took and held the wealth of the world.

A duchess perhaps, but a do-it-yourself duchess, she reminded herself whimsically, laying down her dustcloth and shaking back her taffy-gold hair, and walking back through the double doors into the richly paneled corridor. She'd thought at first that even with Cammie and the Mop Brigade they'd never make it, but now as she looked around her, she noted with satisfaction how Queenscourt had responded to all this effort. Its hardwood floors and dark woodwork gleamed. Its yard and hedges had taken on a well-cared-for look. Its windows, newly washed, flashed proudly. The soft patina of old wood and fine leather was restored and crystal and china and fresh-cut flowers (brought by Ginny) gleamed in the dining room. Diane was very grateful. She could never have done all this herself in so short a time, and she said so.

"I think this house likes to have its face washed, its makeup changed—like a woman," she told them.

There was a sudden, slightly unpleasant, silence.

"Well, we must have it ready for Duke, mustn't we?" said Hildegard nervously. "I mean, this is your first dinner at home, isn't it? What are you having?"

Diane hadn't thought about that. She fell to planning a menu, not caring that the eyes of the others were meeting above her head, that they were exchanging significant glances, glances that said, *We'll hand her over to him safe and sound. And from then on, she's on her own.*

Chapter 9

Diane had the living room windows open and was airing the room when she heard a scrunching on the gravel and saw a red Jaguar slide to a halt at the front door.

"Who's that?" she asked Hildegard.

"Oh, lord," said Hilde. "That's Kitty Feverell and she's brought Frieda Payne with her!"

They spilled out of the car, their dresses bright splashes of color, and came into the house with glad cries. How lovely everything looked! My, hadn't she been *busy*? And don't tell me you've got Cole working too? They admired the furniture, they gabbled brightly, and they watched her with bright curious eyes.

"I've got to hand it to you, Diane," said red-haired Kitty, sinking down onto a divan and crossing her handsome legs. "You've certainly taken hold here. It isn't easy to fill Lorna's shoes."

"I don't intend to," said Diane with asperity, remembering those rows of lovely shoes in the closet upstairs. "She wore size eight. I wear size five."

Kitty laughed and lit a cigarette. "You're exactly what Queenscourt needs, Diane. A disbeliever. A chaser of shadows. And to think you've already spent a night alone here!"

"No, I stayed with Hilde."

"Oh," said Kitty regretfully.

"But I undoubtedly *will* spend lots of nights alone here," said Diane clearly. "Duke has to be out of town a lot."

"And you're not afraid?" asked Frieda suddenly. Diane noticed that Frieda's eyes were very large and round and blue. She was a strawberry blonde with a redhead's complexion, a little overweight and trying to hide it.

"I haven't found anything here to be afraid of," Diane said frankly. "Lots of dust. No ghosts."

"I think if I lived here *I* would be afraid," said Frieda with her precise diction.

"Oh, that's just your German grandmother, Frieda," said Hilde easily, "filling you full of stories about doppelgangers and werewolves!"

"I had an English grandmother," said Kitty, "and *she* had heard of the 'fetch.' "

"What's a fetch?" asked Diane.

"The one who comes to fetch you. To your grave."

"It is not so funny," said Frieda, her large round eyes on Diane. "There is a feeling about this place that is not right."

"Oh, well, that's because the windows are open and the furniture's all out of place," scoffed Hilde. "After the floor is waxed and everything is back in place and shining, the feeling will be quite different."

Frieda closed her mouth and sat back in her chair with a little shiver. Her gaze kept darting to the side, into corners, behind her. When Cole came into the room, she started. Diane found Frieda's behavior more frightening than any of Kitty's taunting words.

Frieda really does feel something here, she thought uneasily. *She isn't making it up*. And remembered Stella . . . and Cornelia.

The thought gnawed at her, so that when Frieda invited Duke and her to dinner at the Club next Monday, she said yes, absently, that would be lovely, and what time? And Frieda said vaguely, "Oh, six, seven, whatever time suits you. We'll be in the bar from about five-thirty on; just come when you can."

It didn't occur to Diane then that Frieda might be just a little too anxious, that dinner dates usually had a time attached. She was too absorbed in the dark shadows that seemed to hang over her like cobwebs and was glad when Kitty said brightly they really must be leaving, they had Emmeline Franklyn to contend with—that woman had put them both on her Library Benefit Committee and was literally working them to death, and Diane must come out and see Kitty's gorgeous new rambler. Diane promised to come soon and was glad to close the door on Kitty's merry babble, on

Frieda's nervous glances, and go back to her volunteer "Mop Brigade," as Hilde had dubbed them.

Lunchtime came and Ginny insisted they all have lunch at her house. Diane left the group tramping toward Westwind and ran back to make sure she'd locked the front door. As she returned, walking more slowly in the blistering heat, she saw Uncle Trench sitting on the terrace in his wheelchair.

"Aren't you coming in for lunch?" she hailed him.

"Certainly am," he said. "Just waiting for you, little Missy. Wanted to see you in a good light." He peered at her. "Stand right there."

Obediently, Diane stood in full sunlight and smiled down at the fragile old man. "You're so like, so like. . . ." he muttered. "You have her way of looking at me."

"Like who, Uncle Trench?"

He seemed not to hear. "She's gone away now," he said, disheartened. "She used to come to me sometimes, but I haven't seen her for a long time now." He added pettishly, "No pretty women around here any more. Just a lot of Carrie Nations bossing me, telling me not to drink. Drink doesn't hurt a man. Drink's all that gets you through sometimes, dark of night." He was still grumbling as Nora Allerton came out of the house and against his protest that he could do it himself, wheeled him into the house.

"Uncle Trench says I remind him of someone," Diane told Ginny as Cole pulled back for her one of the delicate white chairs upholstered in blue damask and they sat down to lunch in Ginny's cool dining room with its blue and white Chinese willow design wallpaper that rose above the elaborate white wainscoting to meet a frosty white ceiling where a crystal chandelier sparkled below a burst of plaster rosettes.

Instead of responding to that, Ginny gave Uncle Trench a disapproving look across the round table—with its lavender monogrammed linens, its blue and lavender flowers rising from a silver bowl in the center, catching its own reflection from a mirrored base. "Uncle Trench should take the pills the doctor gave him instead of hiding them all around the room," she said. "This isn't an Easter Egg Hunt, you know, Uncle Trench. Poor Nora ruins her stockings crawling around on the floor looking for those pills."

The old man laughed wickedly and Diane let the matter drop. Still there had been something guarded in Ginny's man-

ner, and for a moment an answering flash in Cole's eyes, though Hilde had remained placid. She ate her creamed chicken thoughtfully. Of whom did she remind Uncle Trench? She decided to ask Cole at the first opportunity, and that opportunity came shortly after lunch when, back at Queenscourt, they almost collided in the hall, he with a mop and pail he was carrying up to Cammie, she with her arms piled with empty boxes.

"I've never seen so many boxes," she laughed, setting down her load and fanning her hot face with her hand.

"Oh, Duke just sort of camped here after Lorna died," said Cole. "Everything here had been bought in case lots and as boxes were emptied, they were probably just tossed into a convenient pantry."

Diane had a sudden wistful vision of Lorna never going to the supermarket, just picking up the library phone with a leisurely manicured hand and reading a list into it in a bored voice. Or maybe having it read into the phone by a paid minion. Everything delivered in trucks. She sighed.

And realized this was a good opportunity to ask him.

"Cole. . . ." she began hesitantly.

He gave her a shrewd look. "I have a feeling you want to ask me something," he said, "that you don't want the others to hear."

"You're right," she said wryly. "Who is it Uncle Trench thinks I look like?"

"It's not very flattering. I wouldn't pursue it," Cole said surprisingly.

She straightened and looked at him. "What? Don't hold out, tell me!"

"Trashy girl from the Extension years ago," he said. "Her name was Mary Jo Jerney. I wouldn't know about it except one time Uncle Trench took a bad fall and I helped Ginny put him to bed and this snapshot of a good looking little blonde fell out of his pocket; it was sort of worn around the edges. Mary Jo—the girl—looked a little like you."

Diane said blankly, "So?"

"He was going to marry her," Cole said grimly. "He was a young man then, and he came back from college and fell head over heels in love with Mary Jo. She was working in the kitchen as extra help during the summer. The story goes they used to meet in the woods out behind Westwind and the

flame burned bright. One day, young Trencherton came in and announced he was going to marry the kitchen maid come Christmas day, like it or not. Of course, the family hit the roof, his father threatened to cut him off, and they finally got him away to school in the fall without anything decisive happening. Ginny found some old letters Uncle Trench had kept that his parents wrote to him when he was in college and they told the story."

"So what happened to her?"

"She died," said Cole. "Lot of flu going around then, it was around the time of the First World War. Lot of people around here died of that flu. She was one of them. Happened in December, right before Trencherton got home for Christmas. He went on one wingding of a bender, and you might say he's never got off it since. And he won't ever allow Christmas to be celebrated at Westwind."

"He *loved* her," whispered Diane, feeling tears sting her eyes. "How terrible for him."

"Well, he couldn't marry the kitchen help," said Cole impatiently. "Especially that trash from the Extension. Can you imagine Mary Jo presiding at Westwind? Picture her sitting beside Ginny at the table?"

"I never knew her," said Diane gravely, "so I don't know whether I could picture her there or not. But plainly Uncle Trench could."

Cole snorted. "He was a potential alcoholic. Mary Jo was just his excuse. If she hadn't died, he'd have found some other reason. Nobody carries a torch for that many years!"

Cole could be right, she thought wistfully, but it was a hard-hearted view. Poor Uncle Trench. . . .

She sighed and went back to the dining room where Hilde and Ginny were bustling about, and began sorting knives and forks of an Edwardian design in heavy sterling, and trying to familiarize herself with the table linens which she found in bewildering profusion, spilling over from the dining room into one of the small pantries which served as a downstairs linen closet for the table linens. They varied from Irish lace and heavy creamy monogrammed Irish linens to delicately embroidered cloths and napkins Ginny told her carelessly had been done by French nuns, long fragile lace cloths so filmy she was almost afraid to touch them, and staggeringly large banquet cloths that Ginny assured her had been used—and fre-

quently. She sighed with joy over the gleaming tall-stemmed Danish crystal glasses, the heavy cut-glass bowls Cole told her had come down in the MacQueen family along with the enormous sterling tea set on its handsome footed tray. Ginny pointed out that there were several smaller tea sets, also in sterling, and showed her the sets of dishes no one of which seemed smaller than service for twenty-four, and one of which Ginny told her would serve a sit-down dinner for fifty guests. Haviland, Spode, Royal Doulton, Wedgewood, sterling chafing dishes, compotes, vast mirrored and sterling center-pieces, met her dazzled eyes.

"Why don't we have a surprise party for Duke when he arrives? Right here?" Ginny's voice carried across the long dining room to Diane, who was leaning on a mop talking to Cole. Cole was lounging against the long oval table, but sometimes he stooped over to say something the others couldn't hear. "That is, if you two can come out of your huddle," she added.

Diane, absorbed in what Cole was saying, started. "What was that, Ginny?" As she spoke, the phone rang.

"Go and catch the phone, Cole," said Ginny irritably. "I just asked Diane a question. Give her a chance to answer me."

"So as I was saying," said Cole, finishing his sentence, "if you're looking for examples of unrequited love, you'll find plenty of them around here: Jeff's for Cammie. Cammie's for the late lamented Ronald MacQueen. And others," he added cryptically and strolled away to answer the distantly ringing phone.

Diane turned to Ginny with a smile. "Cole was telling me Jeff is sweet on Cammie but she won't have him. I thought he'd taken a shine to her myself, the way he follows her around." She was glad Cammie and Jeff had finished and—with her warm thanks—gone home, so she could say that without fear of being overheard.

"That's nothing new," said Ginny. "Jeff has always been crazy about Cammie, but Cammie feels he's beneath her. The lower strata have their caste system too, you know. And Jeff's not very bright."

"It's too bad," said Diane soberly. "He has such a nice protective attitude toward her. Respectful and sort of—sweet."

"You're a sentimentalist," laughed Ginny. "They should

both be past it now! I was saying, how about a surprise party for Duke?"

Across the long oval table Hilde said nervously, "I don't think that's such a good idea." *After all, he doesn't know Diane's opened the house, her tone reminded them. He may blow his top.*

"Maybe a housewarming later," said Diane, smiling at Ginny. Her thoughts raced ahead. She had to get rid of them fairly early this afternoon. There was something she had to do. Alone. Before Duke got home.

She had to erase the personality of Lorna from the house.

When Cole had showed her Lorna's room, she had blithely ignored the matched dresser set in repousse silver with the garlanded initials "L. MacQ. T."—Lorna MacQueen Tarrant. And closed the doors hastily on the great closets bulging with Lorna's clothes, that Duke had apparently never touched. She had left that for last. Now the time was getting close. Something had to be done.

"Some newspaper reporter from the MacQueensport Courier wanted to come out and interview you, photograph the house," Cole came back to report. "I told her to ask you again in a month, you'd be straightened out by then. I think it made her mad. She'll probably print on the society page that your hair is falling out and you're losing your teeth."

Diane's lips twitched. "I'll survive that," she said.

"Yes, you will," he said, smiling at her. "Anyone viewing the original would never believe such slander."

"The interesting thing," she said with a frown, "is how she knew I was opening up the house."

"News travels fast around here," he said cheerfully. "As you'll soon discover. We've got a grapevine that rivals satellite communications." Ginny called him and he ambled away.

The afternoon wore on.

And still they lingered, chatting, these good friends of Duke's who were helping her so much. She would gladly throw open her doors to them tomorrow, but right now she wished they would all go home.

They didn't. They became even more helpful, more solicitous. As if they were worried about her and the scene that well might follow tonight when Duke returned.

It had been decided that a cold dinner would be best since Diane was uncertain at what hour Duke would arrive.

Chicken salad, sliced tomatoes, potato salad, cheese, French bread, coffee, all served on avocado china on a frosty linen cloth in the domed octagonal breakfast room with its gold teapaper walls and slate floor, its wrought iron furniture worked into clusters of grapes and twining leaves the soft green of weathered copper. Here also the windows reached to the stone floor and the long sheets of glass were covered with a rich tracery of iron lace. With its ceiling rising to a pointed dome—which from the outside was an architectural feature of Queenscourt's rear wall—its long Chinese rice paper paintings in narrow ebony frames, its tinkling wind-bells and heavy iron wall sconces with thick squat scented candles—for which there was really no need since the light reflected up into the dome from fluorescent tubes hidden from view by a curved moulding that went entirely around the ceiling—it was a startling room but not so intimidating to Diane as the long cavern of the elegant dining room which, she felt, lacked only a throne to make it royal.

"Put no extra strain upon the bride with the preparation of food," advised Cole owlishly. "The Duke storms his castle tonight!"

It should have been funny, but nobody laughed. They all looked uneasy instead.

Finally, at seven o'clock, Diane knew she had to do something. She rose gaily.

"I've forgotten to clean out my closets!" she cried. "I'm still living out of suitcases in my own house!"

"Oh," said Hildegard, frowning. "Yes. Lorna's things."

"There are huge closets in the attic," said Ginny. "Lots of room. Lorna kept everything, you know. All her clothes. Clear back to grammar school and before. Toys, everything—it's all up there."

For some reason, Diane found that thought rather unattractive. That all her predecessor's worldly possessions were hovering somewhere above her head. High up. Ready to swoop down. . . . She told herself she was being ridiculous.

"I'll need help, carrying them up," she said. "I shouldn't have put this off; I should have done it earlier."

"We understand," said Hilde.

They all trooped upstairs and Diane flung wide her long closets. Lorna's lovely clothes hung there. Her eyes caught the gleam of satin, the shimmer of lame, the soft muted

colors of expensive wools, imported tweeds. And below, neatly arranged, were Lorna's beautiful expensive shoes.

"Size eight," said Hilde regretfully. "Too small for me, too large for you and Ginny." She sighed. "Cole, we're going to need boxes to carry this stuff in. Run down and find some for us won't you?"

"Right." Cole was off down the stairs and came back in time to see Ginny and Hildegard, their arms loaded, starting for the attic looking like ants carrying bread crumbs, trailing long sweeps of material behind them.

"Here." He offered the boxes to Diane. "You pack. I'll carry."

She gave him a grateful look. "You're very nice, Cole."

"Oh, I'm a great fellow," he said. "Everybody says so."

She laughed. "Just grab an armload of those dresses and dash after Ginny and Hilde. They'll know what to do with them."

With Cole gone, she fled to the long vanity, snatched the silver dressing table set off and stuffed it into a box. Powder, makeup, all the little personal things that had been Lorna's. She began tearing open the drawers, stuffing things into the big box at her side. Underwear, nightgowns, stockings, handkerchiefs, scarfs, belts. Suddenly her hand struck something with hard corners and she pulled out a photograph in a silver frame. The glass was broken, but behind that broken glass was a face. Lorna's face. It could be no other.

She stood there looking at it a long time.

"Lovely, wasn't she?" said Cole's voice softly behind her.

Diane jumped. She had been standing here mesmerized; she hadn't heard him come in.

"Yes," she said shortly, and stuffed the picture into the box with the rest.

But that lovely face with its sweep of dark hair, its challenging eyes and mocking smile remained with her, seemed to be looking over her shoulder as she stuffed Lorna's possessions helter-skelter into carton boxes to be stored in the attic. And that mocking expression seemed to be saying slyly, *You won't get rid of me as easily as this.*

She ran to the bathroom, snatched up the bath salts, the oils, the perfumes that had been Lorna's. She wanted no scent of Lorna to linger in this house. And then with another box she ran through the room, snatching at random things that

looked personal, as if they had belonged to a woman, and finally carried that box up to the attic herself, to join Ginny and Hilde. Cole was not in evidence—probably gone downstairs for another drink, she surmised.

When she reached the top of the attic stairs and stuck her head in the door, she blinked at the tall beams that stretched to a point high above her head. Outside the steep slate roofs were picturesque; inside they were overwhelming. Even with the lights on, it was still gloomy, a great dim wasteland, stretching out with no clearly defined edges.

"Oh, there you are, Diane." Ginny threw open the doors to one end of a long row of closets that disappeared into the gloom, and Hildegard whistled.

"Lorna had everything," she said wistfully, looking at rows on rows of dresses, riding clothes, coats, suits, evening gowns.

"Down at that end of the attic it starts," said Ginny matter-of-factly, pointing into the gloom. "Everything from baby rattles and teething rings and rompers, right through toys and kindergarten clothes and grammar school and boarding school—her teenage things would fit you, Diane; she was about your size then—right on to here, where they stop when she died. See, there's lots of space left. Lorna planned to live a long time and fill those racks and build closets on the other side. We used to play up here when we were children and the closets at this end weren't even built then."

Diane was speechless. Such a vast collection of women's gear in a private home, she had never even imagined. From where she stood stretched the trappings of Lorna the elegant woman, reaching back, back in the gloom to Lorna the precocious teenage hoyden, the beautiful pampered child.

"You should make a clean sweep. Give it all away to charity," said Ginny briskly.

"Maybe I will," said Diane, still awed by the sight. She had a sudden vision of a charity bazaar with mountains of Lorna's things stacked about and people whispering and Duke's furious face. "But I should see if there's anything Duke wants to keep first," she added hastily, and Ginny looked at her in amusement.

"Now there's a thought," Hilde's eyes widened.

Diane's cheeks pinked a little. "After all, it's his house," she said defensively.

"It was Duke's for a couple of years," said Ginny, turning away suddenly. "It was Lorna's forever."

Forever. . . . She didn't like the sound of that. The word seemed to have teeth.

"Well, it's awfully gloomy up here," said Hildegard, shutting the long row of closet doors Ginny had opened. "Unless we plan to prowl all the way down to the children's section—" she tried to laugh but it didn't quite come off—"I think we should go down. And let Diane get dressed and ready to greet Duke. Diane, are you coming? Ginny?"

Ginny nodded. Hilde led the little procession downstairs with Diane following, looking back and checking to see that the attic door was shut after her. She didn't want the door yawning open into that dark cavernous place.

It was clear they were all staying. She began to worry about that. Suppose Duke really was terribly angry. It would be horribly embarrassing to have a scene in front of his friends. Around her, the house gleamed peacefully. It was ridiculous, this rallying round. If only she could find a graceful way to get rid of them!

Her chance came when the phone rang and Cobbie's voice, a little anxious, came over the wire. "Diane, I got a telegram from Duke. He's booked on a flight that's due in here at nine-thirty. I'll meet him at the airport, he can drop me off at my apartment, borrow my car and come right out there." He hesitated. "You're not alone there, are you?"

"Oh, no. Cole and Ginny and Hilde are here," said Diane.

"Good." Cobbie sounded relieved.

Diane replaced the receiver. Here was her chance to clear them all out before Duke got home. She'd only have to make a small "mistake" about the time.

"Duke's getting in at eight-thirty," she announced. "He'll be out here by nine."

"Well," said Hilde. "I shall finish off my last efforts here very quickly." She headed for the kitchen, whistling. But it was almost nine before she emerged with a jaunty, "Well, I guess we should take our leave decently. Unless we're staying."

"By no means," said Cole. He shepherded Ginny and Hilde firmly along. "Besides, Blanchard's burning a roast for me tonight; he'll expect me to eat it before it's completely charred."

Diane bade them all good-by at the front door, thanked them warmly, promised to call Hilde tomorrow, closed the door—and saw Ginny's billfold on the hall floor where she'd dropped it.

She opened the front door silently on its well-oiled hinges, meaning to shout Ginny's name. And stopped.

All three of them stood indecisively with their backs to her, but their words reached her clearly in the evening light.

"I'm starving but—do you think we ought to leave her alone?" Ginny's voice, sounding troubled. "It's getting dark. Shouldn't somebody stay until Duke comes?"

"Ben's waiting dinner for me too," said Hilde reluctantly. "And—well, the house has certainly been acting well enough. . . ." Somehow that comment from sensible Hilde frightened Diane most of all. It sounded as if Hildegard considered the house *a living thing*.

"It always does, when there are groups of people there." Ginny's composed light voice. "It's when there's a woman there alone that—"

"Hush," said Cole, turning and seeing Diane standing there, the billfold in her stiff outstretched hand.

"Oh," said Hildegard. She sounded upset.

Diane felt her performance at that moment rated an Academy Award. "I'm glad I caught you before you left. You dropped this, Ginny."

"Thank you." Ginny took the billfold. "Well, I must dash. I promised Kitty I'd meet her at the Club. And Cole's off to his burned roast, and Hilde to her starving husband." She didn't move.

They all studied Diane's face. Diane kept her expression bright and clear and unruffled. "Thanks again," she called, and closed the front door. Stood in the shadowed front hall and leaned against it, her eyes closed.

The house behaved very well with crowds, they had said. But with a woman alone. . . . And she was alone.

She opened her eyes, switched on the lights and looked around her. Everything looked just the same. The marble floor gleamed. She walked down the hall and looked toward the living room. On either side of her in the distance were windows that sparkled, furniture that glowed with polish, the rich colors of oriental rugs muted in the fading light.

She walked back to the octagonal breakfast room—she had

elected to eat here their first night together; it was cozier than the big cavernous dining room—and checked again to see that everything was ready. And then thought restlessly, Why not take a swim before Duke gets here? Just a quick dip. She had noted that Jeff had filled the pool at the side of the house toward Westwind. Yes, that would be nice, she told herself. She did not care to admit, even to that inner Diane, that she would prefer not to see night fall in this house alone.

She ran upstairs, congratulating herself on having eradicated all the personal mementoes, the reminders of her predecessor, and in the upper hall she saw something white. She bent down to pick it up. A glove. She frowned. But she hadn't dropped a glove. She tried it on. Too large. Lorna's glove. Undoubtedly it had fallen out of one of the boxes being carried up to the attic. She glanced up the dim attic stairs, the top lost in gloom. She had no desire to carry that glove up there now.

She carried it instead into her room and tucked it into a top bureau drawer so she would remember to take it up the next day. And as she changed briskly into her white swimsuit it struck her that Lorna's hand still reached into her bedroom. Via that glove. It was not a nice thought and it speeded her footsteps as she ran downstairs, tucking her hair into a white swimming cap.

It was really dusk now. It would be actually dark momentarily. She would not want to walk over the dark lawn to a totally dark house—and the hall light cast no glimmer out here. She had an inspiration. She would turn on the living room lights and they would light up the lawn on the swimming pool side.

She ran to the living room, touched the switch and the crystal wall brackets that lined the walls sprang into light. With economy in mind, she decided to leave the trio of huge central chandeliers turned off. Nice, she told herself wryly, that she had a choice. Queenscourt might be scary, but it was certainly luxurious. Then she went through the hall, leaving only a dim light there, an alabaster lamp burning on a rosewood table.

She went outside, onto the now dark lawn. The night was soft and warm about her. Somewhere a sleepy bird sang. In the distance she could hear the occasional roar of a particu-

larly loud truck from the superhighway, but generally speaking the big trees, the hedge, were a screen blotting out all the sounds except the lazy sounds of summer within the sweeping tree-roofed lawn.

She walked across the lawn in front of the house and then onto the side lawn, moving through long shafts of light from the arched living room windows, and stood smiling at the pool. It lay mostly in darkness, but the water sparkled invitingly on this hot evening. It was not a "modern" pool, free-form or with a terrace around it. This was a long rectangular pool with a concrete edge and the lawn growing right up to it, and at the far end, the shallow end, an enormous weeping willow dipped its branches right down to the water and obscured the whole corner of the pool.

Diane loved the water. She slipped into it now, cut the surface cleanly, went under, came up, shook her head, and began to float on her back. She told herself she was silly to believe stories about the house, about Lorna. Lorna was dead and gone; she, Diane, was mistress of this house now. Duke's new wife. . . . She thrilled again to the thought of that, knowing he'd be home soon, his arms would be around her. This would become not a house of fear, but a house of love. . . .

Loath to go in, she floated lazily on the dark surface of the pool, eyes shut, enjoying the summer night. Back home in Virginia a river had flowed right past her door and she'd gone swimming every day when the weather was good. How wonderful to have her very own pool! She flipped over and began to swim the length of the pool and back, then turned over on her back and floated again, drifted dreamily on the pool's smooth surface, lulled by the chirping of crickets, the gentle rustle of the willow as a breeze struck it. She was at the deep end of the pool now, far from the willow. She opened her eyes for a moment and looked from the darkness between the black shapes of shrubbery and trees toward the tall bright windows of the living room. They cast long paths of yellow light across the cropped lawn and onto the pool.

She stretched lazily, reclining in the water, and closed her eyes again. Duke would be home soon. Heaven in Ohio. She would hear his car. Just as she heard Ginny's car zoom by earlier on her way to meet Kitty. Just as she would hear any car that went by the hedge. Why not stay here until Duke came? she asked herself drowsily. And rise from the water

like a water nymph and run toward him wet and shining in the moonlight? She was on the edge of sleep.

How long she lay there drowsing she did not know.

Suddenly her senses came alert. Something had changed. What it was she did not know but her mind sensed danger. Her eyes snapped open. The blackness of the willow lay ahead of her, the shrubs and trees were black shapes in the darkness, and above the trees was a lighter patch that was the night sky frosted with a handful of stars. The great house bulked dark on her right, a towering monster.

She knew what was wrong. The lights were out in the living room.

Diane stiffened, every sense coming suddenly alert, tensed like a jungle animal at the water hole when it hears a twig break behind it.

Duke. Of course. Duke had come home.

But she hadn't heard a car. . . .

Well, she had been almost asleep; maybe that was why she hadn't heard it.

She was almost motionless now, treading water. And, unreasoningly, Fear trod the water with her.

Open your mouth, she thought suddenly. *Speak.*

"Duke," she called, her voice thin with fright. "Duke."

Silence.

And then, a sound. At the far end of the pool that was now completely dark, where the weeping willow dipped its trailing branches down into the water, a slithering sound, a splash.

Something had joined her in the dark pool.

Chapter 10

Diane panicked. She began to swim very fast toward the edge of the pool. Something brushed her leg. She thought it was a human hand, groping.

Terror exploded in her brain. She could hear herself screaming as she fought the water, leaping away from whatever it was that had clutched at her.

"Diane!" Duke's voice. Coming from the dark end of the pool. "Diane!" A splash as he struck the water, swam toward her with fast knifelike strokes.

Then Duke was pulling her out of the pool, dragging her up over the concrete edge onto the lawn. "Diane! What is it, Diane?"

She shook uncontrollably in his arms. "There," she choked, feeling as if she had swallowed half the pool. "Something came into the water after me. It—*brushed me!*"

"Some animal," he muttered. "What the devil were you doing in the pool anyway? I'll get a flashlight."

"I'll help you find one," she gasped. "There's one in the kitchen."

She clung to his wet sleeve and together they ran dripping into the big kitchen, turned on the lights. She opened a drawer and gave him the flashlight and he went back out. Diane tore off her bathing cap so she could hear better, grabbed a towel and started rubbing herself dry. She could hear Duke walking around outside, could hear twigs snapping under his feet.

"Nothing there," he reported with a growl, coming back into the big stainless steel and tile kitchen.

She saw then what she hadn't noticed before. That he was dripping wet and that it was a business suit he was wearing. Water ran down his coat and trousers and dripped into his

shoes. He was standing in a pool of water on the green tile floor.

"Duke!" She was suddenly penitent. "Oh, I'm sorry. You're so wet!" She began to dab at him apologetically with a towel.

He was silent. He stripped off his coat and tie and shirt and draped them over kitchen chairs. Then his shoes and socks and trousers. She had never known a man clad in his shorts could look so formidable.

"I'm going upstairs and take a shower," he said grimly.

She followed him meekly up the back stairs until they emerged into the long corridor that led to their bedroom. Duke strode ahead. "I have something to say to you," he flung over his shoulder.

She could guess what that would be.

She took a quick shower, and dressed frantically. She put on the blue dress that was his favorite. And combed out her hair fluffily. The girl whose eyes met hers in the mirror looked very scared.

The door of the adjoining room opened. Duke stood there, tall and grim, knotting the belt of his nubby gray silk robe. She had almost forgotten. There was a closet of Duke's clothes in there. Left behind when he took off for the Islands.

"Well, don't look so frightened," he said in a more normal tone. "I presume you've some food in the house, since you seem to have moved in."

"Oh, yes." She sprang up. "It's a cold dinner since I didn't know when you'd arrive. Chicken salad." She looked at him hopefully. "You like chicken salad."

"Yes," he said, as if he were speaking to a child. "I like chicken salad."

Once downstairs, he walked through the rooms, switching on lights, switching them off, while she put the food on the frosted glass top of the table with ornate metal legs in the octagonal breakfast room. It was smaller than the dining room and friendlier somehow. She felt she'd have a better chance with him there.

He came in and joined her at the table as she was lighting the tall avocado candles of the centerpiece—white roses provided by Ginny.

"You've done a good job of opening up the house," he said. "It looks as if a crew had been at work on it for a week."

But whatever prompted you to do such a thing?" *Why didn't you follow my orders?* he meant.

"I wanted to be here. With you. Where I belong," she said.

He studied her. "And you think you belong at Queenscourt?"

"I belong where you are!"

"Where are the servants?" he asked. "Who have you gotten?"

"There aren't any servants. I told Ginny and Hilde and Cole that I didn't want any servants. That we were still—well, honeymooning really, and with just the two of us we could make do with occasional help."

"They must think you're very quaint," he said ironically.

She flushed, stung by his remark. "They don't think I'm quaint at all! They pitched in and helped me open the house. They thought it was fun. And Ginny lent me Jeff and Cammie for the heavy work for a couple of days."

He shook his head in amazement.

"Lorna," he said, "had a staff of four and she didn't consider it sufficient."

"Well, the *new* Mrs. Tarrant will manage very well without any!" she flashed. And then leaned toward him, trying to make him understand. "Duke, you gave me a thousand dollars. That's a lot of money."

"Not to keep this pile going."

"Yes, it *is*, Duke. If we don't spend money on servants, if I'm careful with the groceries and the utilities, we'll have plenty left to give—oh, at least a couple of parties, and have some smaller dinners. You can *entertain* here."

His expression was bemused. He got up from the table, began pacing the floor, stopped suddenly and faced her. "You've heard the stories about the house, of course?"

"Yes."

"And they didn't scare you?"

"No."

"Then why were you screaming when I parked the car?"

"I'd nearly fallen asleep in the pool. The sound of your car must have roused me. I opened my eyes and saw that the living room lights had gone out—you'd turned them out."

"You must be dreaming. They were out when I came in."

Her eyes widened. "Then a fuse must have blown."

"Possibly." He strode toward the living room. "They don't

work," he came back to report. "Go see if they come on when I replace the fuse." He disappeared in the direction of the kitchen, called after a minute, "Can you see, did they go on?"

"Yes," called Diane, peering down the hall, and went back to the octagonal breakfast room.

"There's your 'ghost,'" he said, joining her. "A blown-out fuse."

"I called you and you didn't answer."

"I was parking the car and I didn't hear you. You must not have called very loud. Anyway, the garage is on the other side of the house. My plane was a little late. When Cobbie told me what you'd done, I dashed right out."

Suppose you hadn't dashed right out, she thought. Suppose you had only rung me on the telephone and I had been in the pool with something reaching for me, touching me, and had heard it ringing, ringing. . . . Suppose. . . .

"Something *was* in the pool with me," she insisted, closing her eyes at the memory. "it—*touched me*. And it felt like . . . a hand. I was flailing away, trying to get away from it, trying to get out of the pool."

"And screaming," he said, studying her.

"And screaming," she admitted.

He drummed his fingers thoughtfully on the table. "Probably a muskrat," he said. "We have them around here and they like a dip at night as well as the next one. I'm surprised you had the pool cleaned."

"But I didn't," she protested. "I just assumed Jeff did that when he filled it."

He groaned. "No chlorine, I suppose? We'll be lucky if you don't come down with typhoid! Look, Diane, cleaning old pools like that one is expensive and troublesome. Just let the pool alone and stay out of it, do you hear? I don't want you getting sick. And don't let anyone else swim in it either. We don't want a lawsuit on our hands."

A muskrat. Well, it could have been. If a muskrat felt like a human hand reaching for you.

"What's done is done," he said. "Cobbie told me how you blackmailed him out of the keys." His eyes glinted. "I wanted you safe in Virginia, but since you've made your choice, we'll play out the hand at Queenscourt. Just one thing." He turned and faced her sternly. "If I hear one more hysterical

scream from you about this house, I'm packing you off to Virginia whether you like it or not. Queenscourt has unfortunately become a sort of neighborhood curiosity. Whether we like it or not, we are under observation here. If we make fools of ourselves, it will hurt my chances of getting proxies—and I need those proxies like I need my right arm. Sensible men are less likely to hand their proxies over to men who live in haunted houses with screaming wives."

She hung her head. She felt very badly about everything.

"Buck up," he said. "We'll make it work somehow. It's a big house to be alone in; if it scares you, get out of it. Go shopping. Play golf or swim at the Club. See movies. I'll be home in the evenings so you won't have to be alone here at night. And Diane—" he leaned forward and laid his hand on hers, pressed it gently—"in spite of everything, I'm damn glad you stayed."

She smiled back at him across the table. He was everything she had ever wanted in a man. And there was a look in his eyes she had not seen before. A glint of admiration. Not the admiration of a man for a woman, but of a man for a comrade in arms. Marriage, she realized suddenly, was many things. Under the waving palms of the Out Islands it was one thing. But here in the cold reality of this Midwest steel town, it was something else. At least here she would sleep in the circle of his arms. Every night. She was convinced she had done the right thing.

"What are you thinking with that cat-a-mouse look?" he asked.

She gave him a lazy smile. "That I'm . . . sleepy."

"Good thought that." He set down his cup. "My bedroom or yours?"

She blushed. "I thought we'd both use the green room. Separate rooms seems so—formal."

He frowned. "I'd forgotten we didn't have twin beds here. The reason Lorna and I had separate rooms was she couldn't stand twin beds and I wake up at the slightest touch or motion of the bed. I was in Intelligence during the war, learned to keep my senses on a hair trigger when I slept and never have been able to shake the habit."

"Oh," she said, disappointed.

"It isn't for long." He took her by the hand and led her out into the main hall and up the wide front stairway. "As

soon as we're back in funds, Diane, you can buy us the damndest twin bedroom suite you can find and I'll move in with you."

But for now, she thought despondently, in this big uneasy house—separate rooms.

As they walked down the hall toward their bedrooms, Duke stooped down suddenly and picked up something white. "You dropped something," he said, and Diane was surprised to see that it was the other glove. There must have been two, and in her haste she had dropped one in the hall while putting the other one away. Funny she hadn't noticed it. But Duke's nearness gave her a bravery she did not feel without him; Lorna's gloves had no power to terrify her tonight.

All Lorna's most personal belongings—like her clothes—must by now be stored in the attic. And if anything more turned up, she told herself blithely, she'd cart it right up there to join the rest.

Duke went into the adjoining room, whistling. And stuck his head back in to say with a grin, "I'll keep my door open. Always ready for visitors."

She threw a shoe at him. He ducked and disappeared. She thrust the glove in the drawer to join its mate, undressed, put on a lovely pink short nightgown that had only one disadvantage—it made her look like a disheveled twelve-year-old—and sat down at the beautiful vanity to brush her hair. It responded to the strokes, springing back gleaming and taffy-gold.

She heard Duke's shower running, heard it cut off, but his footsteps were muffled by the soft rug. He appeared in the doorway. "Since you had a scare tonight, it might be better if you bunked in with me tonight."

"That's a good thought," she said, putting down the brush on the vanity's mirrored top.

He crossed the room, pulled her to him. "God, it's been a long time."

"It would have been longer if I'd gone to Virginia," she pointed out and fit herself into his arms with effortless ease, lost herself against his powerful chest, heard his strong heart-beat, felt again the wonder that this man should have the power to move her so. *I love him so much*, she thought, frightened, *it stops the heart. What if I should ever . . . lose him?*

Duke carried her next door into the big room with the tan-gold decor. It seemed a gilded haven. She curled up against him in the big bed with a small happy sigh. She had been right to open up Queenscourt, so right. . . .

But Duke did not fall asleep. Beside her he tossed restlessly. She lay wide awake as he flung away the sheet, threw himself face down on the pillow.

It was trying to sleep with her that was disturbing him. He was used to sleeping alone.

She got up and stole quietly into the next room in the moonlight without switching on the lights, tossed back the green satin bedspread with its monogram "L. MacQ. T." and sank into the queensize bed with its green tufted headboard. Her thoughts were on Duke, on the future.

She had forgotten that this was Lorna's bed. Outside the gentle patter of rain lulled her to sleep.

She woke feeling exceedingly cheerful. She jumped up, put on her soft beige silk pants suit, belted the bright golden links about her waist and—hearing sounds of wakefulness in the next room—ran lightly downstairs to get breakfast, where she swiftly put Duke's clothes, still wet from last night's adventure, out of sight. She felt happy to be handling the pretty pink and white breakfast dishes, the copper bottomed skillet.

Duke was feeling expansive too. They ate in the octagonal breakfast room with the sun pouring in through the long iron lace windows, and he complimented her cooking (But anyone can fry an egg, she thought.) He went out whistling, to return Cobbie's car to him, said she could drive into town and pick him up at Cobbie's later. He wasn't sure when but he'd call her. Yes, it would be sometime this afternoon, not too late.

It wasn't till then she remembered to ask him, "Did things go well on your trip?"

"So-so," he shrugged and drove away.

Diane washed the pretty breakfast dishes and sang as she put them away.

The phone rang. Ginny's light voice came over it, sounding a little concerned. "I suppose this is ridiculous, Diane, but Uncle Trench insists he heard screams over at your place last night. Was he dreaming?"

Diane laughed. Everything seemed so clear and bright in

the morning. "I took a swim and a muskrat joined me in the pool," she said ruefully. "It scared me and I yipped."

Ginny sounded relieved. "I was worried when he told me this morning. That Allerton woman sleeps like the dead—I think *she* must take Uncle Trench's sedatives instead of giving them to him!"

Diane was reminded of her near accident. "Do you know what size stockings she wears? I owe her a pair for running her off the road into the bushes!"

"You owe her nothing," said Ginny decisively. "Cole told me how she was walking down the middle of the road. I pay her more than she's worth for taking care of Uncle Trench—not for being a traffic hazard. Don't encourage her; she may decide to try for more new stockings that way and get herself killed!"

The door chimes chimed distantly, eight notes.

"I'm sorry, Ginny, but there's someone at the door," said Diane.

"That'll be Cammie," said Ginny. "I sent her over with some flowers." Brushing aside Diane's thanks, she hung up.

Diane made the long trek to the front door, flung it open to see gray-haired Cammie standing there with her arms full of pink roses. "Miss Ginny sent these," said Cammie stolidly. "They're kind of wet because of that rain late last night."

"They're beautiful, Cammie. Bring them in and view your handiwork. Doesn't Queenscourt look beautiful?"

Cammie walked into the enormous front hall, stood with her big feet planted solidly on the gleaming black marble floor, and gazed around her. "Looks just the same as before to me," she said frankly. "I guess I saw through the dust." She looked at Diane. "This house is full of ghosts for me, Mrs. Tarrant." Her voice was wistful. "I can stand here and see Mr. Ronald walking across the hall from the library, and Miss Lorna clattering down the stairs with a riding crop in her hand. For me it was never empty . . . just full of people I knew."

And Diane was reminded Ginny had said Cammie worshipped the ground Ronald MacQueen walked on—but he hadn't noticed. And now he was dead and never would notice. . . .

She felt tears sting the back of her eyelids for Cammie, homely and gaunt and old and still carrying a flickering

torch. Before she could speak Cammie said abruptly "I've got to get back," and thrust the roses into her arms and left. She had a feeling that Cammie might want to cry too. She laid the roses carefully on a marble-topped rosewood table in the hall and went back to shut the front door which Cammie in her hurried exit had left open.

And saw Nora Allerton just passing one of the tall brick gateposts at the entrance to the drive. She waved to the big woman in the white uniform and hurried down, crunching over the gravel. Looking puzzled, Nora Allerton took a few tentative steps through the open gates into the driveway.

"I wanted to know your stocking size," said Diane. "Since I ruined yours the other day, the least I can do is replace them."

Nora Allerton's sullen expression was replaced by a pleasant smile. "Why, there's no need to do that, Mrs. Tarrant," she said. "I was out too far in the road, I admit. Should have been on the shoulder."

"There wasn't any shoulder," said Diane. "It was covered over by bushes and thorns sticking out there. I'm surprised you didn't hurt yourself."

"I wouldn't have been walking out there in the middle of the road except I was so mad," confided Nora Allerton. "Do you know what Mr. Westcott had just done? He'd hidden my magazines under his bed so while I was crouched down looking for them he could scoot out of the room!"

Diane concealed a smile. "Uncle Trench is bored," she said. "He's used to more activity."

"*Bored!*" exclaimed Nora Allerton. "He's insane, if you ask me! Pinching people when their backs are turned! Calling me 'Marnie' and Miss Westcott 'Garnet' and telling us we're both headed for the madhouse! He's out of his head half the time! If it gets any worse I'm going to quit and go live with my married sister in Detroit. Even if the cold is awful fierce up there."

"I'm sure he'd miss you," said Diane placatingly.

"Miss me!" grumbled Nora. "He doesn't even know me half the time! Don't you worry about my stockings, Mrs. Tarrant. I mended them." She cast a nervous look in the direction of Westwind. "I'd better get on with my morning constitutional and not let Miss Westcott see me talking to you. She doesn't like me talking to people—afraid I'll tell them things that old man says. Awful things!"

She trudged out of the driveway shaking her head and Diane watched her head determinedly for the bad turn at the corner of Trowbridge Road where one woman had already lost her life. Diane sighed. Some people never learned. She turned and strolled back inside, put the lovely pink roses in water in a tall silver vase in the front hall and went up the stairs whistling.

From the landing she cast a look down into the yawning hallway below. Mellow light gleamed softly over the black marble floor, the pink roses in their shining silver vase made a bright patch of color at one side. For her the hallway was empty, but old ghosts walked these halls for Cammie: Ronald MacQueen, the man she had loved hopelessly, and Lorna his daughter, whom she'd mothered as her own. . . .

That woman who had watched the house . . . she thought suddenly. It had given her an eerie feeling, as if a malevolence had regarded her. She shook her head to clear away the cobwebs. She couldn't afford to let herself be afraid of the house, not if she intended to live here. She had to regard these things rationally.

She forced herself to march down the long corridor and stand looking out the big windows overlooking the rear of the property. In the woods the trees sparkled fresh and green in the sunlight. Birds sang.

There was no woman sitting motionless astride a big black horse silently staring up at the house.

With a feeling of intense relief, Diane walked more jauntily back down the hall.

As she reached the stairwell that came down from the attic something white fluttered in the air—instinctively she recoiled before she realized it was only a piece of sheer material—and came to rest on the floor.

Frowning a little, she picked it up. Her fingers were somehow reluctant. She studied the sheer chiffon in her hand and looked up into the gloom above. It was only a scarf that had fluttered down the stairwell, something that had caught unnoticed on a newel post or step as they carried their loads of clothing and boxes upstairs, that had chosen this moment to come fluttering down. But it was plainly monogrammed "L. MacQ.T."—Lorna's scarf.

Her expression very set, Diane carried the fragile bit of chiffon into her bedroom and put it in the drawer beside

both the white gloves. Staring down at them, it came to her for a moment that she was *assembling* Lorna in her bedroom.

She slammed the drawer shut and ran down to the bright sunshiny kitchen, breathing hard. She had to get hold of herself. She poured herself a cup of cold coffee and gulped it down.

As she finished it, the phone rang. To her surprise, it was the enterprising newspaper reporter from the Courier, calling again. "I've been trying to reach you, Mrs. Tarrant," said the voice briskly. "I'm Jody Phillips of the MacQueensport Courier. We'd like to do a feature story on your house—you know, 'Bride Comes to Historic Mansion'—that sort of thing. Could I come out one day this week and interview you and take some photographs?"

And Diane, newly wary, said cautiously it would have to be later, she wasn't settled in yet and she was so terribly busy just now. And tried to soothe the sharp sound that crept into the woman's voice at the other end of the line by assuring her she'd try to make it soon. Yes, she'd call and let her know when it was convenient. Perhaps sometime in July.

And hung up the phone, realizing once again that Duke was a public figure in MacQueensport. She walked across the thick soft rug in the living room and gazed somberly out through a tall arched window at the pool. It was a beautiful summer day and the sun glinted innocently on the water. The willow brooded, the shrubs glistened in the sunshine. It was a scene of peaceful contentment.

Restless, she walked outside and as the bright sunshine struck her, her fears fell away. She wandered over to the pool and stood looking into its depths, studying her reflection, then walked down to the willow, meaning to sit down under its drooping branches. The ground was still soft from last night's rain and grass was sparse under the willow for the sun seldom struck there. *I must plant some shade grass*, she thought absently, then frowned and bent down.

There at the edge of the pool, at exactly the place where she had heard something splash into the water last night, was the imprint of a shoe. A woman's shoe.

And she knew even before she pressed her own foot into that print that it was too big for her and Ginny and too small for Hildegard. About a size eight.

Lorna.

Chapter 11

She backed away from that sight, almost afraid to look at the water, lest a white arm beckon, a pale face with long dark hair that swayed around it like seaweed, smile up at her with a flash of strong white teeth and mocking eyes.

With one hand pressed over her mouth to stifle the scream that was forming, she turned and ran back to the house, through the open front door, and stood in the front hall, shaking.

It's not true, she thought. It can't be.

The sun continued to beat steadily down on the oaks in the yard. The grass continued to be patches of light and shade, rich and green. The world—outside and inside—was just as beautiful and just as peaceful.

No, she *wouldn't* believe that Lorna's ghost prowled these grounds. Someone had done this!

Seized with a sudden wild desire to see if one of Lorna's shoes was missing, she ran up the wide front stairway, down the hall, up the attic stairs and flung open the door to the big attic.

It was dark inside. Unfriendly. She could feel the unfriendliness in that room.

She reached inside and switched on the lights. The great expanse that stretched out interminably sprang into dim relief. Let's see, she had put the boxes—over there. That was it. With great decision, she moved toward the box that contained the shoes she had scooped up from the floor of Lorna's closet. But halfway there something caught her eye and she walked over toward the long wall of closets instead.

One of the doors was not quite shut. There was a dark crack showing.

But in front of it and pointed toward the closet door, as if it had been left there when its owner stepped out of it, was a

shoe. Size eight. Lorna's shoe. She remembered it from her bout with the closet below.

She bent over stiffly, hating to touch it, and picked it up, turned it over so she could see the sole.

There was mud on the sole, and sticking to that mud was a grass blade. The mud was almost dry.

With a stifled scream she flung the thing down and ran out of the attic, skittered down the attic stairs, tore down the hall and almost fell headlong down the wide front stairway in her flight, ran all the way to the front door and flung it open.

And plunged directly into Coleman Vair's astonished arms.

He reeled backward from the impact and then recovered, kept his arms well around her. "Well, well, this is a nice greeting! What's the matter? Is Duke chasing you around with an ice pick?"

She was so shaken she could hardly speak.

"The shoe," she faltered. Then, through her terror, came Duke's warning. He would send her away, he would send her away.

"What shoe?" demanded Cole. "Come in and sit down, Diane. You look as if you're going to fall down."

"That's it," she improvised promptly. "My shoe. I nearly fell as I came out the door. Well, you saw it, you caught me."

He looked puzzled.

"I think maybe my heel's broken. Do come in, Cole. I'll just sit down for a minute. Falling always—scares me."

He watched her keenly, as he followed her into the big living room.

"Diane," he said, "if you're afraid of this house, I'm available most afternoons and some mornings. For wife sitting. You'll find I'm very good at it—and versatile. I read verses aloud. If goaded, I even play the piano."

She laughed. Somehow sitting here talking to Cole in this handsome, well-appointed living room, the whole thing seemed impossible, ridiculous. It could not have happened. There could not be a woman's size-eight footprint out by the pool; there could not be a muddy shoe poised to enter one of the attic closets. She had imagined it all.

"I'd love to have you come over any time," she said warily. "Wife sitting is very popular with me in this big gloomy place. All Duke's friends are cordially invited!"

"Good. I'll start my new duties today. By pouring myself a drink." He headed for the liquor cabinet.

"Of course. Please do," murmured Diane, remembering her duty as a hostess. "You'll find everything right there—except ice. I'll get some from the kitchen." She got up.

"No matter. I'll drink it neat. Mix you one?"

"No, thanks. It's too early for me." She sank back on the green-gold velvet loveseat and resisted the temptation to cover her head with her hands. *That shoe . . .* it could not have gotten there by itself, standing poised to enter the closet. And to believe that Lorna had *worn* it there, had stepped out of it, going back into the closet, into her clothes . . . that was madness.

She heard the sound of the crystal decanter being replaced on the chased silver tray, was vaguely aware that Cole had gone to stand by the window, that his back was to her, facing the lawn.

"What's that dog doing out there by the pool?" he muttered.

By the pool. Her head jerked up. Lorna's footprint. She got up, started across the room.

"Never mind," he said absently. "He's gone now. Must have wandered in from Hildegard's place. She'd better keep him home, he'll get killed on the highway."

"That is a danger here, isn't it?" she said automatically, trying to make conversation.

"Yes," he said. "I had a Doberman. Got killed on the highway."

"Are you sure it was Hilde's dog?"

"Must have been. It was a wolfhound."

If we could walk outside, she thought suddenly. If Cole could see the footprint too . . . then it wouldn't be just *me* seeing it. Duke wouldn't think I was imagining things. If I brought up the subject with Duke tonight, it would be something Cole had noticed that I was just mentioning.

She said brightly, "Why don't you bring your drink out and we'll have a walk around the grounds? You can give me some advice about the shrubbery. I'm a novice really."

"Glad to. Not that I'm any expert." He followed her out the front door and she led him, in a meandering fashion, toward the pool. The sun glimmered through the trees. From a lower branch a bluejay quarreled raucously. She looked up,

seeking the jay, and her gaze traveled past the hedge to Westwind. From Queenscourt's side lawn you could see the upstairs windows of Ginny's house, sparkling in the sun. They looked right down on this side of Queenscourt's grounds. The living room side. Her bedroom side. And as she looked at those windows a face appeared. Uncle Trench's face. She smiled and waved. Abruptly Uncle Trench disappeared from the window. It occurred to her that Nora Allerton, his "keeper," might disapprove of his habit of spying on the neighbors.

"What do you think of the pool?" she asked Cole with studied casualness, strolling toward the weeping willow.

"This pool? Terrible. It was built by Lorna's father when they had rather unattractive ideas of swimming pools. I always told Lorna she should tile it, put a big terrace around it. But she laughed and said it would become an attractive nuisance then, let people swim in the Country Club pool. She liked it this way, private, her own preserve, with the branches dipping down into the water."

Her own preserve. . . . Diane shivered.

"You *can't* be cold," he said, noting the shiver. "It must be eighty degrees out here!"

"Oh, I'm not," she said hastily. They had reached the willow. She reached out and pulled the sweeping branches aside, looked at the spot where she had seen the footprint this morning. It was gone, obliterated. In its place was a jumble of dog tracks.

She let the branch go and turned around. "Maybe I'm coming down with something," she said dully. "I think we'd better go back inside."

"How did Duke take it, your opening up Queenscourt?" asked Cole, and she realized that was really why he'd come over; he was eaten up with curiosity!

"Oh, he thought it was a good idea," she said lightly.

Cole stopped and looked down at her, his eyes glinting. "That's truly remarkable," he said. "Duke is the kind of man who likes only his own ideas. I shouldn't have thought. . . ."

"What did you expect him to do?" she asked, amused. "Thrash me?"

"Something like that," he said wryly. "You seem to have a soothing influence on him. No doubt the effect of a 'good' woman. It wasn't that way with Lorna."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean they fought like cats and dogs."

"Physically?"

"They quarreled. Lorna wasn't faithful to Duke and Duke couldn't stand it. He threatened to kill her once, in full view of God and everybody over at the Club, when he caught her in the garden with some friend of Todd's. And on that last day, he was over at the Club drinking with Hank Spooner and Hank told him that Lorna had said she was going to take her MacQueen Foundry out of the Tarrant Steel combine, and Duke hit the roof. He slammed his drink down on the bar and said he was going to 'have it out with her' and tore out of there like a maniac. Not long after that he 'found' her body. . . ."

"I don't like your inflection when you say 'found,'" said Diane coldly.

"Put it any way you like." Cole looked gloomy. "We're all friends, but the facts aren't too rosy."

"You mean they didn't get along?"

"That's right."

She sat down on the grass, near a clump of red lilies. Cole joined her, companionably stretching his long legs.

"How about before they were married?"

He sipped his drink thoughtfully. "They sort of *competed*. I guess that's what you'd call it. They seemed to excite each other, bring out the best in each other then. The flight to new heights, all that. And I guess sex gave it an edge."

"But they must have known it wouldn't work!"

He shrugged. "Nobody knows anything about these things. Why does one marriage go on the rocks and another, equally headed for disaster, you'd say, survive? Who knows?"

"But if she was—like you say—why didn't she just have an affair with him? Why marry him?"

His lips twisted. "Did you know that in England after the Norman Conquest rank was indicated by the kind of hawk that was carried on the wrist? Royalty carried gyrfalcons, earls carried peregrines, yeomen carried goshawks, priests sparrow hawks, servants carried kestrels. Well, Lorna MacQueen knew just the kind of hawk she wanted. Nothing would do for her but the mighty gyrfalcon—and she found one in Duke Tarrant. Trouble was, she never could train him to her wrist. And in the end. . . ."

He killed her. The words hung unspoken on the summer air. Diane felt her fingers close convulsively around the branch she had picked up, and a little pulse beat in her throat. *But he didn't, he didn't!* she thought.

"She died without ever training him," he finished morosely. "And before he could tame her."

Diane's head went up. "What was she like, Cole? Lorna? I've seen her picture, but what was she really like?"

"Beautiful," he said in a remote voice. "So beautiful it hurt to look at her. No photograph could capture what she was. Lorna was wild, reckless. When those green eyes flashed, everything, everyone fell right into line. She had a commanding look. She was born to command; all the MacQueens were. They'd run their part of the world from Queenscourt for so long they'd forgotten how to do anything else. When they wanted something they just reached out and took it. And so it was natural, I guess, that she'd want Duke. He was just about the most man ever to come out of these parts. You always felt if they met head on, there'd be broken bones all over the place. Sort of electric. Like that."

Diane shivered. *Like that, was it?*

And if that was what Lorna was like, what a pale shadow she must seem to follow her. . . . But no man would kill a woman like that, she reasoned. He'd want to keep her. Unless in her wildness she had driven him too far. . . .

But that couldn't be. Cole's suspicions were unfounded. Duke had told her how it had happened. And she believed it. *Must believe it, to go on living with him.*

She frowned at Cole. "You know as well as I do that a woman named Mattie Lingerly saw Duke on the road," she said testily.

"A girl named Mattie Sue Lingerly," he corrected her softly. "She was seventeen."

"All right, a seventeen-year-old girl then."

"And pretty as a picture," he added. "Candy-box blonde. Just Duke's type. . . ."

"I thought you said Lorna was his type," said Diane rudely. But somehow the picture of a candy-box blonde frightened her.

"I'll bet Duke told you that Mattie Sue told the police she looked at her watch because it was a new watch and that was how she knew what time his car passed her on the road."

"Yes."

"And I'll bet he stopped right there." Cole gazed at the oak branches swaying above them. "You know, I have to admire Duke. He tells you just what he wants you to know and stops the moment he's made his point."

Fear tingled at her suddenly. She controlled her voice. "What else is there to know?"

"Duke would have my hide if I told you," Cole muttered. He turned over on the grass and added in a cheerful tone, "I don't know what Duke has done to deserve the unswerving loyalty of so many beautiful women." He sat up suddenly. "When your husband swoops in, tell him I was pecking around in the nest," he said equably, "and watch his feathers ruffle."

Diane sat there picking at a clump of clover on the lawn, oblivious to the calls of cardinals and robins, the swift flashing flight of a bluejay to its nest, ignoring the sounds of summer all around her, trying not to think, not to face the obvious.

She started when Hildegard's green station wagon swung into the drive and honked gaily.

"I'll take my leave." Cole got up, brushing himself off. "I prefer my women singly rather than in pairs. Shall I give you this empty glass or throw it nonchalantly over my shoulder Russian-style?"

"Don't litter my yard with broken glass, Cole," she said ruefully. "I don't need any more pitfalls."

She meant to laugh as she took the glass he proffered, but he was looking at her so intently her laugh faded.

"No," he said soberly, "you don't need any more pitfalls than you've already got." His expression changed as Hilde got out of the car and approached. "Well, just remember I'm available any time in any of my specialties. Instant seduction. Ghost chasing." He waved to Hilde and headed on out the drive.

"Well, hail the bride," said Hilde jauntily. "You're looking none the worse for wear. I take it you and Duke have made a nice adjustment to life in the mausoleum?"

"Hilde," said Diane warmly, "come in and have some coffee." As they strolled inside she said, "Your dog was over here this morning. Cole was worried he might wander out on the highway and get killed."

"Oh, not my dog," said Hilde. "Poor old Lover Boy cut his paw pretty badly last night and I have him bandaged up and cloistered in the sunroom. He's just not up to frivolity."

"But Cole said it was a wolfhound."

"That's funny." Hilde looked surprised. "Lorna and I were the only people ever to have wolfhounds here on Trowbridge. It's great Collie territory."

Diane felt her flesh creep a little. She controlled her voice, made it casual. "Was Lorna's wolfhound like yours?"

"Blood brother," said Hilde promptly. "Only hers swept all the blue ribbons. They were practically identical only my Lover Boy had the sweeter disposition. The only person he ever disliked was Lorna; he'd growl if she came near him. And I know it's catty to say this, but I always thought that Lorna, making that dramatic entrance with her dog, sort of influenced the judges subconsciously. I just ambled in with sweet old Lover Boy, but Lorna burst on their sight. . . . Oh, well, she won top everything."

"What happened to her dog?"

"Like all Lorna's pets, he was ill-fated. "Got run down on the road one night. Lorna didn't keep a tight rein on anything, wasn't interested in her dog unless she happened to want him at the moment. Same way with her horses." Hilde's jaw hardened.

No other wolfhounds around here . . . but Lorna had had one.

"Cole was very definite that it was a wolfhound," Diane muttered.

"Well, Cole certainly ought to be able to tell a wolfhound from a mutt," said Hilde cheerfully. "Unless he was so swashed he couldn't tell either one from a squirrel."

"He wasn't swashed," said Diane. Or was he? she wondered suddenly. Could she really tell?

She shivered. Ghost dogs she didn't need. Especially nice useful ones that obliterated human footprints.

They were leisurely drinking their second cup of coffee in the breakfast room when Diane came to a sudden decision.

"Hilde," she said abruptly, "when you finish your coffee, I want you to come up with me to the attic."

"What do you want to do now?" laughed Hilde. "Bring all those clothes down again?"

"No," Diane felt her spirits rise, walking along beside

Hilde's big, competent, ghost-dispelling frame up the backstairs to the attic. "I just want you to tell me—" she flung the attic door open, switched on the lights that brought the huge area into dim relief—"what you see over there by the closets."

Hildegard peered ahead. She took a few steps inside. "I don't see anything," she said. "What am I supposed to be looking at?"

"A shoe. In front of the closet there. Don't you see it?"

"No," said Hildegard.

Diane, who had been averting her eyes, turned to look then and her breath caught.

The shoe was gone.

Chapter 12

"But there was a shoe there, Hilde," cried Diane. "Right there!"

Hilde shrugged. "Well, there's certainly no shoe there now."

Diane ran to the long row of closets, yanked open doors, peered inside. No shoes. She scrabbled through boxes, found the one that was predominantly shoes, searched it frantically. The shoe she sought was not among them. Nor was its mate.

Suddenly she was aware that Hilde was watching. Hilde would think she was crazy. And the one thing Duke couldn't afford right now was a crazy wife.

"My eyes must be playing tricks on me," she said nervously. "This morning, I'd have sworn—"

"Oh, come on, Diane," yawned Hilde. "Leave that mess for some other time. You're too young to get a shoe complex. Besides those shoes are too big for you. Unfortunately," she wriggled her toes in her open sandals, "the beautiful things are too small for me."

Diane closed the door carefully on the big attic with its open closet doors, its jumble of shoes on the floor. Standing there on the stair landing with her heart pounding, she wished for a treacherous moment that she could seal that door forever. Like the entrance to the pyramids.

Downstairs Hilde turned to her. "I'm worried about Ben," she said bluntly. "I've tried to get him to see a doctor, but he won't. How did he look to you?"

"Fine. A little tired maybe."

Hilde sighed. "I'm probably just borrowing trouble. It's just that this past year he's been. . . ." She let the words drift off. "Want to go riding, Diane? Our horses need exercise."

Away from Queenscourt! Diane brightened.

"I'd love to," she said warmly. "I'll walk down and say hello to Ginny on the way."

"bring her with you."

Hilde drove away and Diane crossed the lawn toward Westwind, Ginny's house, giving the pool a wide berth. There was a break in the hedge that separated Westwind from Queenscourt for convenience in walking between the two houses and she went through it, admiring the clipped perfection of Ginny's lawn and shrubbery, the geometrically shaped boxwood, the long white immaculate Mount Vernon style house with its look of flawless maintenance. Showed what money and determination could do.

From the flagstone terrace on the Queenscourt side of the house Uncle Trench called, "Come talk to me, little Missy."

This was her chance, she thought, to ask him all those things she wanted to know, as she joined the old man who sat alone, a thin and somewhat pathetic figure crouched in his wheelchair, watching her with small bright eyes in a wrinkled face.

"I envy you over here relaxing on the terrace," she smiled, "after all the furor of getting moved in."

"Oh, you're moved in, all rightee," said Uncle Trench cheerfully. "Came in with suitcases and a lot of mops. I watched you do it. See everything from here, you know."

"Yes, I guess you do." She wanted to ask him if he'd seen anyone lurking by the pool last night, but he scotched her hopes by adding regretfully, "Course, I go to bed with the chickens. Nora Allerton sees to that. Unless there's a party," he added eagerly. "Then I stay up late. Watch the pretty girls. You planning to give a party, little Missy?"

Plainly he'd forgotten last night's screams. Maybe it was just as well. She smiled at him. "If I do, I'll be sure to invite you," she promised.

He brightened. "Hope you mean that," he said. "*She* used to say she'd invite me. Never did though."

"Who didn't?"

"Lorna MacQueen, that's who," said Uncle Trench with sudden venom. "Never liked her for sour apples. No, indeedy. She was a wild one, all rightee. Never stopped. Drove that husband of hers right up the wall."

He seemed not to realize that it was Diane's husband of whom he spoke.

"Never did like the woman that lived in that house," he added. "Didn't like old Marnie MacQueen, Lorna's mother. Nor her sister Garnet. Both dead now, of course. Like Lorna." He chuckled heartlessly. "Folks used to ask me didn't I envy the people next door at Queenscourt, their house being twice as big as mine. But I'd tell 'em no, indeedy, that wasn't a happy house over there. Know how Marnie MacQueen died? Went to the booby hatch and jumped out a fourth floor window. And her sister Garnet—Lorna's stepmother—would have ended up in the asylum too if that hit and run driver hadn't got her. Lorna'd have gone the way her mother went, except she fell down the stairs. And her father blew his brains out one fine summer night in the trophy room. Nope, folks that live at Queenscourt don't live happy and don't live long. And if Duke don't have enough sense to get out of there, it'll happen to him. Just like those girls he got mixed up with after Lorna died. Both dead."

"But I thought one had gone to Europe," protested Diane.

"Oh, she went, all rightee, but nobody's heard from her in a year, have they now? Not even her mother. Not so much as a postcard. All this talk about her running with the Jet Set or holed up with some Spanish grandee, that's hogwash. She's dead, I tell you. Dead, dead."

He kept chuckling, his old hands moving, fingering something he held on his lap. He looked at Diane speculatively. "You play checkers, little Missy?"

"I'm afraid not."

"Thought you wouldn't," he said gloomily. And then, reverting back, he muttered, "Dead, all of them. Dead."

"I'm sorry I can't stay," said Diane hastily.

"When you're old, nobody stays," he said morosely. He sounded so lonely she felt a rush of sympathy for him.

"I'll be back," she promised.

He peered at her eagerly from under bushy white eyebrows, crouched in his wheelchair. "You come back, I'll give you an earful, all rightee. That's what people want from the old—an earful. Don't care what they think or feel, just want to know the scandal. Well, I dish it out."

She strolled away, feeling the gaze of those bright old knowing eyes follow her, turned to wave, saw his hand droop as he sagged like a rag doll against the wheelchair. The thing

he had been holding slid from his hand and rolled with a hard thump to the terrace. Uncle Trench pawed for it.

"Wait, I'll get it for you." Quickly Diane retraced her steps, bent down to pick up the object.

And froze.

Before her was an onyx paperweight in the shape of a dog's paw. Moving like an automaton she reached down and picked it up. It felt cold in her hand.

"Well, give it here, little Missy."

"Uncle Trench," she said intensely, "where did you get this?"

Behind her the door to the terrace opened and Ginny came out. "Oh, it's you, Diane. I thought I heard voices out here."

Diane's hand felt stuck to the paperweight. "I was just going around front to ring the bell," she said, "when Uncle Trench waylaid me."

"Oh, he's good at that," laughed Ginny.

"She's got my paperweight," cried Uncle Trench, aggrieved. "Make her give it back."

Ginny peered at Diane's hand.

"I was—admiring it," said Diane with an effort. "He dropped it and I picked it up." She held it out to Ginny.

Ginny took the onyx paperweight. "Uncle Trench," she reproved, "you've been filching things from the library again."

With a fierce look, the old man snatched the paperweight from her, thrust it in his pocket. Ginny sighed.

"I've never seen one like it," pursued Diane.

"Oh, well, that was Lorna for you," said Ginny. "When her dog swept all the championships, she had a plaster cast made of his paw and had this done in onyx."

"How . . . unique," managed Diane weakly.

"Hardly unique. She had dozens made and gave them to all her friends. You'll find one of these little devils in every house on Trowbridge Road and all over MacQueensport." She laughed again. "Lorna never did anything by halves."

Diane felt her hands trembling. She hadn't thought to look for wheelchair marks going to the pool. No, that was ridiculous. Still. . . .

Suddenly remembering why she was here, she said, "Hilde wondered if you'd like to go riding with us?"

"Why not? It's a good way to kill time."

Diane felt briefly envious of anyone whose life was so well ordered that time was a throwaway. There was a lot of work, she thought gloomily, back at Queenscourt, if she hoped to meet Trowbridge Road standards. Not that she could hope for the flawless perfection Ginny had achieved. But just being such an imposing Gothic pile gave Queenscourt an edge, she told herself—deliberately trying to keep her mind away from ghost dogs and onyx dog's paw paperweights.

"Come up with me while I change," said Ginny, and she followed Ginny into Westwind's cool wainscoted interior, admiring the delicate Chinese pattern of the wallpaper, up the curving stairway carpeted in French gray, past a slender grandfather's clock on the landing, to Ginny's pale blue and silver front bedroom, true complement to her luminous gray eyes. The powder blue rug was thick and soft underfoot, the sterling silver dresser set gleamed against Ginny's long mirrored vanity which was flounced with ice-blue satin and delicate silver lace, the furniture was softest gray with a silver light, and Ginny's bed was a miracle of ice blue satin over which was tossed a coverlet and pillowshams of silver lace against a tufted gray velvet headboard.

"It's so quiet here," exclaimed Diane. "Like stepping inside of a jewel box!"

"That's because the servants' quarters are in the rear on Cole's side," laughed Ginny. "Vair Hall gets the noise as they chatter and bang. Here in the front it's peaceful—and perfectly quiet on the Queenscourt side except when Nora Allerton irritates Uncle Trench and he bellows at her. I had the room redecorated last year, wasn't sure the wallpaper was quite right. It's Chinese silk. Do you like it?"

"Anyone would like it," said Diane impulsively, studying the silvery lavender silk wall covering that reached above the delicate blue of the wainscoting. "Your whole house is gorgeous."

Ginny gave her an amused look and Diane flushed. *I'm being naive*, she thought nervously. *I mustn't gush. Ginny mustn't guess we're stony broke.*

She sat down in a velvet slipper chair the color of pussy willow and learned that "changing" meant Ginny's removing her casual melon-colored pantsuit and putting on a soft gray riding habit that brought out the haunting mother-of-pearlness of her eyes.

"I'm not like Lorna," laughed Ginny, fluffing out her silver-blond hair. "I clear out my closets every season."

And buy a whole new wardrobe, was the obvious implication. Diane was abruptly aware she didn't have riding clothes. She had thought somehow that her casual beige pantsuit would do, but looking at Ginny's formidable getup she wasn't so sure.

"I'd forgotten I didn't bring riding clothes," she said uneasily.

"No problem." Ginny rose to the occasion with a regal gesture. "You're about my size—I'll lend you something." Waving aside Diane's protests, she pulled out an immaculate habit in a soft golden tan.

"It's beautiful." Diane touched the whipcord material with delight.

"And will become you," observed Ginny. "Try it on."

Facing her reflection in the mirror in her new splendor, Diane had to admit Ginny was right. She pulled her taffy-gold hair back into a bun at the base of her neck, tied it with a black ribbon, and stood back delighted with the effect. Ginny's knowing grin told her she knew Diane wasn't used to such luxurious riding clothes. Diane didn't care. She thanked Ginny breathlessly and felt suddenly light-hearted, as if her life here would soon fit her as snugly as Ginny's imported tan boots.

"Wear it home with you and keep it until you have your own—sent." There was the barest moment of hesitation there, then blithely, "After all, Diane, we're just one big happy family here on Trowbridge Road. We grew up together. Except for Ben and Hilde. Hilde isn't a local girl, comes from Indiana. Ben's people were from the East originally, but his father bought a large interest in Franklyn Steel and it followed as the night the day that Ben became General Counsel."

"He's a lawyer?"

"Yes. A good one."

"Hilde said he isn't well, hangs around the house."

"I know," said Ginny. Her tone somehow closed off that line and Diane thought that if Ginny knew why, she wasn't saying.

"But the rest of you—"

"Were very close, the four of us. Cole and Duke—they

were like brothers." *Warring brothers*, thought Diane absently.

"And Lorna?" she wondered.

"Like a sister," said Ginny promptly. "We grew up like—like a family really." She seemed to be choosing her words. "And then when Duke married Lorna—"

"It broke up the family group?" suggested Diane.

Ginny shot a look at her. She frowned. "Well—it changed things," she admitted. She gave Diane a penetrating look. "It won't be easy to fill Lorna's shoes."

Lorna's shoes. . . . Diane shivered. Those beautiful size eights that roamed from their base in the attic.

"Speaking of shoes," she said hastily, picking up the sandals she had just discarded in favor of Ginny's handsome new English riding boots, "I'll just run these sandals and my clothes back to the house."

"Nonsense, let Cammie do it."

"I wouldn't dream of bothering her—and besides I was going to pad down to Hilde's in my comfortable old sandals, but in a pair of new boots—" she grinned—"I think I'll just get the car and we'll ride down to Hilde's in style. Luckily Duke left the car for me today so I've got transportation!"

Ginny's eyebrows elevated. "Surely you're going to have your own car, Diane?"

"Of course." Diane made a fast recovery. "But I can't decide whether I want a convertible or a wagon," she lied airily, and dashed away leaving Ginny watching her with her silver-blond head cocked, a slightly cynical expression on her face. Diane thought nervously that Ginny probably didn't buy their "affluence," probably guessed the truth, but as a good friend she'd keep silent, might even subtly help shore up the facade. She ran back across the dappled lawn, feeling the lovely new boots rub a little, and made her way determinedly toward the trophy room—her real objective. She took a deep breath, opened the door and went into the dim, richly paneled interior, cast her eyes quickly around her.

The light from the high arched windows—almost obliterated by tall shrubbery that pressed in around the house—struck a dusty gleam from rows of tall silver cups arranged on walnut shelves, some silver figures in glass cases, a couple of big silver bowls inscribed and set tastefully on dark carved Chinese tables, a portrait of a magnificent horse above the

fireplace, and below a majestic pair of brass andirons made to resemble a pair of eighteenth century horsemen about to take a jump. Cammie hadn't had time to clean much in here. On the walls, under glass in narrow dark frames, were all sorts of blue ribbons. And gun racks. . . . She had a sudden sharp vision of Ronald MacQueen sitting here in this room in the quiet of the summer night, raising one of those guns steadily to his head. She winced as she imagined the sound of the shot, the figure slumping forward lifelessly, the staccato sound of women's heels on the stairs, of voices crying sharply, *What happened? I thought I heard a shot.* She tore her eyes away from the guns. That was not why she had come here, to relive the bitter last moments of Ronald MacQueen's life. Over in one corner, across the rich dark garnet of the Oriental rug, gleamed the rosy-red mahogany of a Governor Winthrop desk with brass fittings.

Diane advanced on that desk, found it unlocked, rummaged through it. But she didn't find what she was looking for.

She turned, disappointed, and saw it—stuck among a bank of tall silver loving cups, an onyx paperweight in the shape of a dog's paw.

She reached out reluctant fingers and picked it up, and in so doing brushed one of the silver cups with her arm. It made a dusty mark. She brushed off the dust, staring down with revulsion at the heavy onyx paperweight.

And then she realized that on this dusty shelf the thing in her hand was quite clean. Someone had taken it up and used it. And washed it. And put it back.

Chapter 13

She pushed the onyx paperweight into the top of the Governor Winthrop desk and slammed the top down. If she'd known where the key was, she'd have locked it. For a moment she stood there shaking as the full impact of it crashed in on her.

Then she turned and ran out through the cool darkness of the cavernous hallway, through the wide front doors, slamming them behind her, jumped into the car and skittered out the gates and into Ginny's curving drive and came to a jolting halt at Westwind's front door.

Ginny was standing, a delicate authoritarian figure, on her long square-pillared verandah before the white front door with its fan-shaped arch of glass above it. She stared at Diane.

"You look white as a sheet," she said. "Whatever happened?"

"I made the turn too fast and nearly ran into your gatepost," lied Diane valiantly.

"Maybe that's why Duke hasn't bought you a car yet," laughed Ginny, climbing in beside her. "Your driving scares him!"

When they arrived at Hilde's, they found her dressed in worn tan jodppurs and an embroidered pink chambray shirt open at the throat. She swept them out to the green and white painted stable with a warm greeting, her big frame stalking alone beside them. "You can ride a horse Duke bought in Kentucky," she told Diane.

Ginny turned with a frown. "Not Satan surely?"

"No, this is Topaz."

"Oh, I'd forgotten Duke bought Topaz in Kentucky too."

"And I bought all the horses from Duke after Lorna died, remember? Except Satan. Francie bought Satan."

"And he damn near killed her, first ride she took," said a new voice and Diane turned to see that Cole had joined them. He had a white silk scarf knotted around his throat and he looked very jaunty.

"I called Cole to join us after I left you," explained Hilde. "Thought he could use the exercise."

"Ben could use exercise too," said Cole, giving Diane an admiring look. "Well, well, aren't we the shimmering new bride today? Fresh as paint!"

"Ben won't come out," said Hilde gloomily. "He's pawing over some legal papers in the library."

"What do you mean 'damn near killed her'?" pursued Diane, determined to make sense of this jumble.

"She took the jump, the horse didn't," said Cole with a shrug. "Slammed Francie end over end into the deep ravine which you'll shortly be seeing. She ended up smashed against a big boulder at the bottom. Broken bones all over."

"*And* Francie claimed Lorna did it," laughed Ginny. "Said Lorna wouldn't let anybody else ride her horse!"

Hilde sniffed. "Francie isn't the rider Lorna was."

"What happened to the horse?" asked Diane.

"Satan? Francie's boarding him at the Country Club—until she comes back. *If* she ever comes back."

"She won't," predicted Cole. "That New York doctor she married won't want to come out here to the boondocks. He'll want to stick with the big city hospitals. More gravy."

"You're behind the times," said Ginny. "They're getting a divorce. Kitty told me."

Cole whistled. "Well, that's Francie for you—always changing horses in midstream." He turned to Diane. "Give you a leg up?" And she swung aboard the sleek palomino named Topaz that Hilde gave a loving pat, called "a dear girl" and described as "gentle as a kitten."

Ginny mounted a borrowed roan, explaining to Diane that her horses too were temporarily being boarded at the Country Club since that last big storm had ripped the roof off her stable and roofers were "at a premium, you just can't get them"—especially since half the roofs in the County needed repair after the storm.

Diane remarked that Queenscourt seemed to have come through unscathed, and Cole swung up on his black stallion that reared up while Hilde laughed and said, "Whoa, there,

boy!" and Cole turned to Diane and said owlishly that Queenscourt would outlive them all, that nothing short of a tornado or a rocket could batter down those walls. And Hilde said, "Ha! All things fall," and mounted a big chestnut. Diane noted how superbly Hilde sat her horse, moving with him with fluid grace. Her own riding was good, but not that good. Ginny and Hilde and Cole all rode as if they'd spent their lives in the saddle. She walked Topaz, noting how daintily the palomino put her hooves down on the soft turf, how gaily she tossed her flaxen mane as they emerged onto the bridal path that meandered through the woods behind the great houses that lined Trowbridge Road.

When they came to a fork in the bridal path, Hilde turned to call to Diane, "The ravine is that way." She pointed to the right. "Don't turn right unless you plan to jump the ravine. It's the only way over. We'll go this way." She indicated the path to the left. "Leads to the Extension."

Diane didn't know what that was, but she followed the others, pleased at the gentle palomino's smooth gait, as they cantered along in dappled sun and shade through woods sweet with summer and the smell of honeysuckle. For a time they skirted the edge of the ravine, a rocky gorge, deep and shaded, on their right. Then it bent away from them, going off through the woods to their right to be lost in a clump of beeches. Diane forgot she was wearing an expensive borrowed riding habit and sat astride a borrowed horse, and for a little while she was back in the Piedmont country riding her father's big gray stallion through Virginia's lovely rolling hills.

She snapped to attention when she realized that Hilde had reined in her prancing mount and was waiting for the others to join her. She came out of the woods into a clearing and saw before her a cluster of five or six ramshackle houses, all needing paint, with battered cars—some minus their tires—rusting away in the dusty grass of the yards. At the nearest house a barefoot, tow-headed youngster swung in a rubber tire suspended from a rope that was wearing through the bark of a weathered hickory.

"The Extension," said Hilde. "Trowbridge Road Extended."

"You mean this is where Trowbridge Road goes?" asked Diane, astonished. She had seen the road as it narrowed past The Elms, but somehow she had imagined it leading to some

gracious estate in a parklike setting. Certainly not this rural slum!

"Yep," said Hilde. "The land back here belonged to the Franklyn Estate and there was this handful of squatters living on it, and when he died, old Latham Franklyn willed them the land their shacks were on and left money to have the road extended out here. There was only a rutted cart track then—and now years have gone by and it's fallen into disrepair. But it is Trowbridge Road Extended. That's why we call it the Extension."

"What a nice thing for him to do!" exclaimed Diane.

"Well, he didn't do it entirely to be nice," said Cole, "but because half a dozen of the kiddies out here were said to belong to him. Different mammas, of course."

"Cole," laughed Ginny. "Don't trot the skeletons out of our closets all at once. You'll scare Diane."

"Nothing scares a woman brave enough to move into Queenscourt," muttered Cole.

"Anyway, even though it's a visual eyesore, it works out just fine," said Hilde. "Gives us a nice source of extra help, able to walk to work. If you don't have live-in help, it's a long way out here, you know. Costs a fortune if they have to take taxis. Three of the girls from this house have worked for me." She indicated the slaunchwise shack where the child, watching them with round interested eyes, was still swinging. "And I can recommend them." She looked at Diane intently, and Diane realized that Hilde hadn't for a minute given up the idea that Diane must have live-in help at Queenscourt.

"But only two of these gems are now available," pointed out Cole. "Mattie Sue seems to have left these parts."

Mattie Sue. Then this must be—she turned to Cole with a questioning look.

"This is the Lingerly establishment," he said in answer to that look. "All the Lingerly girls are pretty, but Mattie Sue's the prettiest of the lot."

As he spoke, a yellow-haired young girl wearing faded dungarees and a man's white shirt knotted in front came out of the house and after a moment's hesitation walked toward them across the dusty grass. Diane didn't consider her expression friendly.

"You wanted something?" she asked sullenly.

"Just riding around," said Hilde. "But yes, as a matter of

fact I was hoping you could give me a couple of days this week, Sallie."

"I've retired," said Sallie Lingerly with an insolent toss of her head. She gave them all a look of deep dislike and turned and walked away.

"Wait a minute," called Hilde, leaning forward. "Perhaps your sister Bonnie—"

"She's retired too," the girl flung rudely over her shoulder and went into the house, slamming the screen door.

Hilde's face reddened. "Well!" she said huffily. "I can't think how I possibly rated that kind of a reception!"

"They're young," declared Cole solemnly. "Everyone under twenty is stark raving mad these days."

Ginny had been watching the girl's retreat with a slightly curled lip, but at Cole's remark she burst into almost hysterical laughter. She looked more animated than Diane had ever seen her. "Now that's the kind of remark you're noted for, Cole," she mocked. "Come along, Hilde, stop glaring at that shack. Anyone would think you'd offered the girl a life of crime instead of a chance to polish your pretty silver!" She wheeled her horse and cantered away, and Hilde with a muttered "Imagine!" gave her big chestnut a nudge with her knee and cantered after her.

"Why do they hate us?" asked Diane, puzzled.

Cole shrugged. "The have-nots always hate the haves. Simple as that."

"No—there was something more," said Diane. "She looked at me too. With a funny expression."

"I'm looking at you with a funny expression too," he grinned. "Don't you identify it? Sort of a puppy-love admiration for the beautiful lady on the beautiful horse. Lorna hated Topaz, you know, said Duke only kept her for her beauty, that she had no spirit."

"This pretty thing?" Diane was shocked. She patted Topaz' flaxen mane, was rewarded by a toss of the head and a dainty dance of hooves. "She's lovely. I'd love to own her."

"Well, Duke will arrange that," said Cole. "You look great on her and Hilde has too many horses now that Laughing Lady's had her foal. She'll sell you Topaz."

"Do you think so?" Diane forgot for the moment they hadn't any money. She wanted to hug the lovely dancing mare and keep her forever.

"Your eyes light up like a child's at a candy store," said Cole derisively. "Duke will buy you a dozen horses if you like. You've only to show an interest."

She flushed. "We're falling behind," she said hurriedly. "We'd better join the others."

"No hurry." He reached over and took her reins. "Let's ride back by another path."

"But Hilde and Ginny—"

"Are used to my wicked ways. You wouldn't want me to disappoint them?"

Diane laughed and capitulated. She rode companionably back beside Cole and when they reached The Elms they found Ginny and Hilde already dismounted and standing beside their mounts with a stableboy coming toward them.

"We thought you'd gotten lost," said Hilde.

"Took a wrong turn," said Cole innocently.

"You took a wrong turn years ago," said Ginny in a bantering tone. "Be sure you don't lead others astray!"

Diane felt uncomfortably that Ginny meant her, that *she* must not be led astray.

"Why don't you girls mount up again," suggested Cole gallantly, "and we'll send a message via the boy here to have Ben mount up too, and we'll all ride hell for leather over to the Club for lunch?"

"That would be fun," said Ginny instantly, and Hilde turned to the boy. "Lenny, would you ask Mr. Ben to join us?"

The boy bobbed his head and disappeared and came back to report Mr. Ben was tied up, he might join them later.

Hilde frowned. Then, "Oh, what's the use?" she muttered and was gracefully astride in a fluid gesture and leading the way.

"Hilde's one hell of a horsewoman," said Cole appreciatively.

"Better than I'll ever be," smiled Diane.

"Oh, well, you don't need a horse," he said with a large wave of his hand. "You're one hell of a woman!"

Diane's ears burned. She hoped that Ginny, riding behind her, hadn't heard that. Cole probably didn't mean all these things he said, but overheard they'd sound . . . flirtatious.

They made their way by a circuitous route that led through an underpass beneath the superhighway and walked their

mounts through the lush green grass that surrounded the Country Club, reined in at the stables, left their horses with the grooms, and crunched on foot over the gravel of the drive up to the long low pillared front porch and at Cole's insistence went into the bar to have a before-lunch drink.

The bar was dark with a low beamed ceiling, rough field-stone walls and soft pink indirect lighting, and was furnished in dark gleaming mahogany and rich red leather. There was a long shining bar and a number of small round tables placed intimately close together. It was crowded when they entered. People swirled around them and Diane found herself caught up in what seemed a dozen conversations at once.

Beside her Hilde muttered, "There's Leda Banning. No matter what that girl is wearing it always looks like a nightgown to me," and Ginny laughed.

With her thousand dollars stashed away, Diane had been feeling secretly quite rich until she heard a little of the talk at the club. It seemed that Clive Vandervoort had given his wife a boat for her birthday, price tag \$35,000, and now Leda Banning wanted one. Speculation was rife as to where she'd cast anchor if she got it. . . . The Fleming twins were sporting matched yellow sport cars. Some people Diane vaguely remembered meeting were said to be adding a huge wing to their house, which seemed unnecessary since the original pile was fourteen rooms. A couple named Kelly were planning a round-the-world cruise. And Rye Tyler came by to thank Ginny for helping him choose an emerald brooch for an anniversary gift for his wife, said it had made a hit, much better than the diamond bracelet he'd been considering.

"Matches her ancestral emeralds," Ginny told Diane after Rye had melted back into the crowd. "Of which she's revoltingly proud. I have heard so much about those emeralds from her that I can't look an emerald in the face any more."

Born to wealth . . . thought Diane. *As I was not.* And hoped it didn't show.

But it was their recession-inspired economies that got to her most: The Vandervoorts had scrapped *their* round-the-world cruise (twenty-four thou, baby!) in favor of several weeks in Rio. The Flemings had let one of the servants go, and were making do with a staff of three. The flooring of the new wing, originally planned to be marble squares, had degenerated to random-width polished oak. And Rye Tyler had

sternly instructed his wife to use her Cadillac convertible *only* when necessary; in this time of gas shortages he'd bought each of them tiny economy cars for buzzing around town.

She could imagine how their jaws would drop if they knew she was planning to get by at Queenscourt on a thousand dollars. Total. And for the first time she wondered if it would be enough. She felt that for Duke's sake she had to match them. Could she do it?

"Look at Chester Banning over there," muttered Hilde. "Would you believe, he used to be solid as a rock? And look at him now, he's a nervous wreck."

"That wife of his is ruining him," said Ginny. "You'd think she'd realize it and *desist*."

"Girls like her don't *care*," said Hilde with heat. "They're hit and run." She turned to Cole plaintively. "Did you bring me over here to starve me? I need solid food."

And together they went into the dining room to find a table by the windows that looked out over the velvet green of the grass and the shimmering green of the lake. Diane was seated with her back to the window. She had a good view across the tables of the rough fieldstone fireplace that reached from floor to ceiling, of the mellow pine paneling—and of Kitty Feverell, just entering from the hall.

"There's Kitty," she said, and waved.

"Oh, God." Cole pushed back his chair and rose. "I'll just toddle back to the bar and drink something neat if we're having *her* along with lunch."

"Hush, Cole, she'll *hear* you," chided Ginny.

Dressed in vivid scarlet, Kitty moved toward them, head cocked. They heard her say coolly, "Hello, Cole, you're looking well," as she passed him, and then she pounced on his vacated chair and joined them. "Well, it's the bride!" she purred. Her eyes were shining. "Here you are lunching with the girls while Duke lunches at the Westwind Grille with Francie Pelton! I know, I've just come from there."

Diane felt herself stiffen.

"Oh, is *she* back?" Hilde stifled a yawn. "I never could stand her myself."

"Ah, but she's a big stockholder in Tarrant Steel, let's not forget," said Kitty with a mocking sidewise look at Diane. "And with the annual stockholders' meeting coming up, perhaps she's come back to look after her interests. Whatever

they are," she added innocently. "No, nothing for me, thanks," as the waitress appeared.

Diane said vaguely, "Let's see, isn't she Lorna's stepsister?"

"Right!" said Kitty. "Used to be head over heels in love with Duke."

"Until Lorna cut her out," murmured Ginny.

"After Duke married Lorna, Francie departed the town," said Hilde. "In a huff. Took a round-the-world cruise. Came back after Lorna died and bought Lorna's horse, Satan."

"Is Satan a big black horse?" interrupted Diane, suddenly remembering that motionless figure, the lone rider, who had sat and watched the house through the trees.

"Why, yes," said Hilde. "We told you about the fall Francie took the first time she rode him. They shipped her off to New York, thought sure she'd die. But some smart doctor patched her up and she married him. We all assumed she was going to stay in New York. And personally I thought it would be good riddance."

"That's right, she was after Ben for a while, wasn't she?" remembered Kitty in her purring voice.

"Indeed she was, the little snippet!"

"Well, now she's back," said Kitty. "And divorced."

And lunching with Duke, thought Diane, alarmed. She kept her expression serene.

"Better watch Duke, Diane," warned Kitty. "Personally I think all men are polygamous."

"Poor Todd," murmured Hilde. "He doesn't look like he has the strength."

Kitty laughed. A nice catty laugh that said none of this could possibly touch *her*. "I watch Todd," she said, looking smug.

"Ben," declared Hildegard flatly, "is monogamous."

"All husbands," said Kitty with authority, "become bachelors as soon as they're a couple of blocks from home." She turned to Diane with a sly smile. "She's gorgeous, you know."

"Who?" asked Diane. As if she didn't know!

"Francie Pelton, of course!"

"I wonder why she came back," mused Ginny. "It isn't as if she had any close friends here."

"Maybe she came back for Duke," said Kitty brightly. "I'd watch out for her if I were you, Diane."

"Perhaps Duke will bring her home for dinner so I can assess my chances," said Diane imperturbably.

"At Queenscourt?" Kitty's eyes widened. "Now there's a thought! Well, I really must run." She departed with a mocking little wave that said, *Don't say you weren't warned!*

"I could easily learn to hate that woman," grumbled Hilde. "Of course, Ben's monogamous!"

"Don't bang your glass down like that," said Ginny. "The waitress will think there's something wrong with your drink."

"There's something wrong with my mind or I'd have said something to her and not just let her go strolling away!"

Ginny sighed. "Kitty claws everybody up," she told Diane. "We all bear her scars."

"I shall sweep her out the front door anytime she gets too much for me," stated Diane, biting into a potato chip with a composure she didn't feel. Her heart was beating double time. Lorna's stepsister who'd been head over heels in love with Duke. Back. Divorced. And lunching with him at the Westwind Grille.

Somehow she imagined someone exactly like Lorna. Dangerous and smiling that mocking smile. The thought frightened her. Francie Pelton was back and Kitty thought it enough of an event to warn her.

"Why don't you all have dinner at our house?" said Hilde. "Maybe it will cheer Ben up."

"Thanks, but not tonight," said Diane absently. "I have to prove to Duke I can cook something more substantial than an egg."

"I'm out too," said Ginny. "I promised Uncle Trench we'd play checkers tonight. Six games!"

"You're too good to the old buzzard," laughed Hilde. "I've played checkers with him and he cheats!"

"I cheat too," said Ginny with composure. "So I manage to win my share."

"The Witch and the Wizard of Westwind!" said Cole, arriving in time to hear her remark, and Hilde laughed uproariously.

And the madwomen of Queenscourt, thought Diane uneasily. Marnie and Garnet and now Lorna, dead and wandering from her grave in expensive size-8 shoes.

And now Francie Pelton. . .

Chapter 14

Her head was still whirling when Todd Feverell came up looking worried, nodded to them all, and asked Cole if he'd heard the rumors about the strike.

"I heard it mentioned," said Cole, "but I thought there was nothing to it. There are always rumors about strikes."

"This time I'm not so sure. And with the stockholders' meeting coming up—"

Cole excused himself, picked up his drink and the two men drifted away to the bar.

"That's life in a steel town for you," said Hilde flippantly. "Strikes and rumors of strikes. Well, there's someone to fill Cole's empty chair. Hi, Frieda."

Frieda Payne detached herself from some friends, greeted them all, and sank down in the chair Cole had vacated. The light from the windows touched her strawberry blonde hair, gilding it. She fixed Diane with her round blue eyes. "The house is giving you no trouble?"

"Only its size," lied Diane airily. Not for worlds would she have admitted otherwise to this group.

"Perhaps you are what my grandmother called a Settler," said Frieda. "A Chaser Away of Shadows. Of evil things."

"There's Emmeline Franklyn!" Ginny jumped up. "She's Chairman of the Garden Club's Masked Ball Committee and I have to speak to her—she's getting away! Emmeline! Hilde, put down your fork, you know how hard to catch she is."

Diane watched with mild curiosity as Hilde and Ginny energetically pursued a tall imperious woman in black, with a crown of handsomely coiffed silver hair, who was just sweeping from the room leaning lightly on a silver-headed cane. Diane was half amused by the grudging deference both Hilde and Ginny paid Emmeline. It was hard to imagine that elegant queenlike figure cowering in bed behind locked doors

while her husband and Trencherton Westcott partied wildly through the house. It proved, she told herself, you couldn't trust even the most flawless facade.

She turned away from her surveillance. "Why would Lorna haunt the house, Frieda?"

Frieda shrugged. "Perhaps she wishes the world to know how she died, why she died."

"She died by accident," said Diane levelly.

Frieda seemed to realize suddenly she was speaking to Duke's wife, who would of course be allied with him. "Many have suggested it was—suicide," she said uncomfortably.

Many have suggested it was murder, thought Diane grimly.

"Lorna's mother pried loose the grill from a fourth floor window in a private mental institution and plunged to her death," went on Frieda. "She'd only been there two days . . . there was talk she'd tried to kill herself before. At Queenscourt. Some have thought the same impulse might have caused Lorna to hurl herself down the stairs."

Madness . . . the madwomen of Queenscourt. Diane peered at Frieda. Was Frieda trying to tell her something? "You don't honestly believe the dead come back, do you?" she asked bluntly.

Frieda nodded energetically. "I do believe it. You must come to see my clock collection. One is a cuckoo clock from Germany given me by my grandmother. Always it worked well. On the day, the hour, the very minute my grandmother died that clock stopped. It has not run since for more than a few minutes. No one seems able to fix it. And," she added softly, "the clock was not in Hamburg where my grandmother died. It was in my bedroom in MacQueensport, ticking away the minutes. When it stopped, I knew my grandmother was dead." She looked curiously at Diane. "The clocks at Queenscourt—"

"Are all running," said Diane, having no idea whether they were or not.

Frieda looked at her watch and said hastily she had to go, she had an appointment with her hairdresser, and Ginny and Hilde returned, chattering, to the table, exclaiming that their food must be cold, and why had they bothered talking to that domineering old woman? She always ran things her own way—she didn't need a committee!

"The Masked Ball's a big charity bash held every August

here at the Club," Hilde explained. "And Emmeline was here to check the *physical layout*, can you beat that? As if the Club's ballroom changes its dimensions year by year!"

"She always does that," said Ginny. "Gives her a chance to lord it over us poor mortals."

"Anyway, the Ball's upcoming," said Hilde. "Everybody goes. Got any bright ideas about what to wear, Diane?"

Costumes, thought Diane uneasily. *Expense*. "My mind's a blank," she said. "What are you and Ben going to wear?"

"Last year we went as Hansel and Gretel," laughed Hildegard. "Me in ragged stockings and a burlap skirt. Ben in trousers, just below the knee, barefoot—both of us with long yellow wigs!"

"You can't top that one," said Ginny. "Why don't you and Duke try something that hasn't been done? Like—oh, Henry the Eighth and Anne Boleyn?"

Anne who lost her head. No, thank you.

"No, that's been done," said Hilde. "You remember Francie came one year with a big papier mache neck over her head and a wax head tucked underneath her arm?"

"Lorna usually stole the show," said Ginny. "She kept all her costumes. They're in the attic. Maybe you should take a look up there."

Diane kept silent. She didn't like the attic. "What will you wear?" she asked Ginny hastily. "And Cole?"

"Me? I'll probably wear a Grecian costume—something flowing and white with high-laced gold sandals; those things have always appealed to me. Garlands in the hair. And Cole—well. . . ." she laughed. "If Cole makes it, he'll probably show up in a business suit with a checkered tablecloth swung jauntily around his shoulders and a jug under one arm saying he represents the "Little Brown Jug."

"But he was too swashed to show up for the last one," said Hildegard sadly. "Ginny, that's your department. You ought to stir him up, drag him out."

Ginny shrugged. "I'll have enough trouble struggling into my own costume without going over and grappling with Cole's. He threatened to come dressed up as Emmeline's chauffeur—Barnaby!"

They both laughed heartlessly over that, and Cole came back and said he wasn't hungry, he'd drink lunch. Ginny frowned and Hilde said it was time she got back, Ben hadn't

joined them. Ginny announced she'd stay and ride back with Cole and Diane cantered back with Hilde through the summer afternoon under the brilliant Ohio sky.

When they reined in at the stables, they saw Ben leaning against the garden fence, lost in thought.

"Look at that," murmured Hilde in a worried tone. "Staring into space. If one of my daughters acted like that, I'd swear she was pining. But in a grown man—I'm afraid he's sick. Hi there, Ben!"

Ben started, turned and his eyes focused on them. "Hello," he said and his smile at Hilde was loving and a little sad. Hilde moved toward him, her big frame alive. *Ginny's right, thought Diane. She loves that man more than anything else in the world. It shows all over.*

"You should have joined us, Ben," chided Hilde.

"Sorry," he said ruefully. "I'm afraid I forgot the time."

"I must go," said Diane, dismounting. "Thanks for the ride."

"Come anytime," said Hilde impulsively. "You don't even need to ask me, just have Lenny saddle up Topaz. She needs exercise."

Diane smiled. "I'll do that," she said. *And get Duke to buy her for me when we're back in funds!* "I must call Duke—he's probably at Cobbie's—and find out when to pick him up."

"Use my phone." Hilde led the way inside to the library, a square room paneled in oak with a sunny yellow rug, shiny brass lamps, deep leather chairs, and in front of the windows a big carved Jacobean desk with red morocco leather fittings and a telephone. She beckoned Diane to sit at the desk and added energetically, "And while you've got Duke on the phone, tell him you're both coming over here for dinner."

Diane sat down at the desk, looked around her at the walls of Ben's law books in their glassed-in cases, handsome and rather musty and learned looking, she thought.

"Hilde, Hilde, I can't always impose on you," she sighed.

"You're not imposing," protested Hilde. "The house seems so empty with my daughters away in Europe, just Ben and me rattling around. You'd be doing us a favor."

"All right," smiled Diane, changing her mind about cooking. "But only if you and Ben will have dinner with us day after tomorrow," she added sturdily.

"That's a promise," said Hilde, and disappeared through the library door while Diane dialed the phone.

Cobbie's voice answered. "Is Duke there?" she asked.

There was the barest perceptible pause. Then, "Yes," said Cobbie quietly. "Duke, it's for you. Diane."

Duke came on the line. "I've been trying to reach you," he said. "Where are you?"

"At Hilde's. Ginny loaned me her riding habit and we've been riding. Cole took us to lunch at the Club. And Duke, Topaz is just beautiful. I fell in love with her the moment I saw her."

"You'll order your own riding clothes," he said in a voice of authority. "Ginny knows the best place; get her to take you there tomorrow. And if you like the horse, I'll see if I can buy her back from Hilde."

"Oh, I'm sure you can. And Hilde wants us to come for dinner."

"Sorry, I can't make it. That's why I was calling you, I won't be home for dinner, Diane. I'll pick you up at Hilde's later."

She felt disappointed. "I heard some rumors at the Club today. Something about a strike."

"I heard the same rumors," said Duke imperturbably.

In the background a woman's laughter tinkled.

Diane stiffened. "Who is that?" she asked.

"Friends," said Duke brusquely. "I'll see you later."

He hung up.

Diane set the phone down rather hard. That tinkling laugh, she had no doubt, belonged to Francie Pelton. Did she now have a living rival as well as a dead one?

She stared at the phone a long time and then went to find Hilde.

"Duke can't make it," she said crisply. "Business. Said he'd pick me up here after dinner."

"Isn't that just like a man?" sighed Hilde. "And you a bride? I just pushed Ben into the kitchen to make him eat something. Even if it spoils his dinner. He's so thin."

"I have to run back and change, Hilde."

"Oh? Would you mind looking for my reading glasses? I think they fell out of my pocket in your attic this morning."

The attic. . . .

"Come back with me," Diane suggested, "and we'll look."

Thus reinforced, she drove back to Queenscourt with Hilde beside her. They went through the gloomy hallway, echoing with their voices, up the wide front stairway. On the landing Hilde peered down at the newel post's pointed top. "That thing's a menace," she said. "But this stairway is museum quality, came out of some castle in Europe. That's why it isn't carpeted—Lorna would never allow a nail to be driven into it. I suppose Duke didn't have it taken out immediately because one must hang onto treasures—even if they're lethal."

Diane stared down at the handsome carved newel post, imagining it blood-spattered with perhaps a tangle of hair. She shuddered and followed Hilde to the attic where they prowled around, searching for her glasses. Once Hilde pulled out a spangled lemon satin dress with a pair of glass slippers dangling from the hanger. "Lorna as Cinderella!" she laughed. "What could be more unlikely?"

Diane regarded them somberly. Glass slippers. . . . Lorna had loved shoes.

"You shouldn't have taken the trouble to line up her shoes in the closet like this," chided Hilde.

Diane felt her heart give a great thump. She'd left those shoes scattered on the floor!

Fearfully, she stepped forward to peer over Hilde's shoulder into the long closet. There, lined up in challenging array, were Lorna's lovely size-8 shoes, all toeing toward the wall as if they had marched in like little soldiers and lined themselves up for inspection.

"Oh, *here* are my glasses! Right beside the shoes."

Diane swallowed and leaned against the wall for support.

"Day after tomorrow's trash pickup day," Hilde told her as they went downstairs. "Your chance to throw some of that stuff away! We have a contract here on Trowbridge with the son of one of the local trash collectors. He works weekends using his father's truck."

Changing to a dark sheer dress, Diane hardly heard anything Hilde said and her own answers were disjointed. Was she going crazy? Had she arranged those shoes herself and somehow . . . forgotten?

Queenscourt's doors were kept locked and only she and Duke had the keys. No servants. So nobody else could . . . *nobody else would want to*, she realized. These were Lorna's

shoes and only Lorna would care whether they were lined up or tossed about the attic floor.

There were beads of perspiration on her forehead and she wore terror on her head like a coronet. It was true then. Lorna had died, but she had never *left*. She was still here, arranging things to suit her fancy. And no locks would keep her out. Lorna's things had been moved to the attic, but Lorna had not accompanied them up there. Lorna was still loose in the house, roaming, unsatisfied. And seeking—what?

Chapter 15

Dinner in Hilde's long dining room was pleasant. Diane sat at the trestle table lazily eating her brook trout and studied the hunting scenes that lined the walls, men and women in pink coats jumping stone fences, dogs in full cry after the fox. Over hot cherry pie Ben roused himself to be a good host and they tried to amuse her with tales of the people who had made Collins County what it was today. Of Cole's father, fiery Coleman Sr., who had inherited Vair Iron Works from his father and improved and expanded it. Of Latham Franklyn, a quirky genius, harder than the steel his mills produced.

After dinner they carried their tall frosted juleps out to the dark terrace and slapped at mosquitoes.

"We ought to put a beamed roof over this thing and have it screened in," said Hilde irritably. "But I never think about it in cool weather, and I can't face having workmen pounding and banging away all summer."

They sank into a companionable silence which was broken by a squeal of brakes and a raucous singing. Hilde nodded toward the dark trees that hid Vair Hall.

"That's Cole coming home, drunk as a lord. Early for him."

"Poor Ginny," murmured Diane, remembering Ginny had promised to stay and get him home.

"Doesn't sound like she's with him," said Hilde. "I guess she gave it up as a bad job." They heard a crash and a male voice cursing. "He must have blundered into his front door again." She sighed. "It's made of hardwood—even harder than his head. We'll probably note some bruises tomorrow."

"Why does he drink so much?"

"He drinks because he's a sad fellow," said Ben suddenly.

"Well," said Hilde. "I see you woke up. And what's to make him so sad?"

"Life," said Ben. "It's a sad business."

"I warned you not to eat all that sauce," said Hilde. "It gives you gas and makes you depressed."

Ben groaned.

Diane sat there wondering why Duke was so late. And if he had dined *tete-a-tete* with Francie Pelton or in company of Cobbie. It made a considerable difference to her. And was rewarded by headlights coming down Trowbridge Road that swung into Hilde's driveway and Duke got out of Cobbie's car looking, she thought critically, rather happy.

"Bridegrooms," scolded Hilde, "shouldn't transact business after sundown. Come and have a drink, Duke."

Duke smiled at Diane and settled his long legs into a big reclining chair with a sigh. "You always were the best hostess on Trowbridge Road, Hilde," he said. "You've a feel for it."

Even in the gloom, Diane could see Hilde's face flush with pleasure.

"When Diane gives a party," he added, "you must give her some pointers."

Diane's fingers clenched rebelliously. Pointers! She could give her own party if there was to be one. Without any outside instructions. Wait till he saw how well she managed dinner for Hilde and Ben!

As they drove the short distance home to Queenscourt, she said, "Hilde showed me the big tree that got singed in the fire when the old Franklyn house burned down. I'd think she'd feel uneasy living so near those people in the Extension."

Duke turned to look at her. "Those people from the Extension didn't set that fire," he said. "They're mainly harmless. Latham Franklyn was an eccentric genius—and a sadist. Used to bring women home for wild parties and end up beating some poor woman half to death."

"But Uncle Trench partied with him and I can't imagine that fragile old man—"

"Trencherton usually passed out before the evening was well begun," said Duke dryly. "Emmeline was around to hear the screams."

Emmeline, crouching behind locked doors in the night. . . .

He said morosely, "One night Latham picked up some girls from town, daughters of mill workers. Beat one of them up

pretty bad. His house burned down the next night. It's thought her father or her big brothers might have done it. They had a fine alibi, all playing poker with friends. The sympathy of the town was with them, so Latham knew better than to press charges. Emmeline kept her son away at Eastern schools and camps. It's thought she didn't want him under his father's influence."

"Why didn't she leave him?" wondered Diane.

"Emmeline comes of that old school of you-made-your-bed, now-lie-in-it," said Duke grimly. "And I guess she liked being rich. She'd tried being poor down South. Poor and trying to keep up appearances."

Like us, thought Diane.

"So she kept a stiff upper lip and didn't make any fuss. But she didn't shed a tear when he died."

"And now she lords it over people, according to Ginny. She and Hilde were running after her at the Club today."

He gave a short laugh. "Emmeline Franklyn married for that money, she gave her whole life for that money, and she's damn glad she's got it. Some women want love. Emmeline wanted power. Naked power. And now she has it. She doesn't have to cotton to anybody."

He parked in front and they went inside.

"Did you ever attend one of Latham's parties?" she asked.

"Never. I'd have been sure to have dragged him off some woman he was flogging and flattened him, and after that he'd have been harder to work with. A business combine is a fragile thing, Diane. It's made up of fallible human beings—some of them, like Latham Franklyn, with a Jekyll and Hyde nature. My interest was in holding it together—and let Sam Wadleigh, the sheriff, deal with Franklyn's nighttime activities."

"And did he? Deal with them?" asked Diane bluntly.

Duke shrugged. "Well, let's say he looked the other way when somebody burned Latham's house down. Not to mention the time 'party or parties unknown' caught Latham going home one night and beat him up. No arrests."

"The sheriff let people take their revenge on him then. . . ."

"Scot free," said Duke cheerfully. "Sam has a great sense of fairness. County never had such a popular sheriff."

She wondered if that "sense of fairness" extended to not

trying too hard to find hit and run drivers with a very real grievance. . . .

She waited for him to mention lunching with Francie. He did not. Instead when they reached the stairs, he turned to her with sudden decision. "Diane," he said, "do you think you could manage a big party here?"

"Certainly," said Diane crisply. "When and how many?"

"It would have to be big," he mused. "We can't afford to offend anyone. Nor—" he added wryly—"can we afford an orchestra."

That rocked her. She had never given a party on that scale.

"How about a light buffet with drinks circulating and stacks of hors d'oeuvres?" she managed. "I could handle that and I wouldn't care how many. We could have punch too. There's an enormous punch bowl in one of the pantries. And make up trays of drinks in advance."

"We'd need a bartender," he mused. "And a couple of waiters to circulate. At the minimum."

"I could borrow servants for the evening," said Diane. "Paying them extra, of course," she added hastily as Duke frowned. "We could open the windows and let the music from the stereo float out on the lawn." She warmed to the idea. "How many people did you have in mind?"

"Probably about—oh, a hundred, maybe more."

Diane sat down. "A hundred?" she repeated weakly. "But we don't know that many people, do we?"

"Lorna had lists," he said absently. "Rummage around in her desk. You'll find one clearly labeled 'Big Brawls.' That's the one you want. Send out little notes. Ginny knows what to do. Ask her."

"When do you want this party?"

Duke frowned. "Stockholders' meeting is Monday week, so it has to be done before that. Since we can't afford entertainment we can take advantage of the big fireworks display that's going to be held in the long meadow across the road on the Fourth of July. Saturday."

"Saturday week. That's awfully *soon*, Duke."

"It's now or never," he said grimly. "I'm throwing this party for one reason only: To impress Garson Smelters. He's the biggest non-local holder of Tarrant Steel stock and he holds the proxies of a number of other out-of-state holders.

He'll be in town several days ahead, checking up on things, deciding how to cast his vote."

"Is he—friendly?"

"No. Before I married Lorna he was friendly. After that he cooled."

"Why?"

"Some personal feud between them, I suppose."

Diane was sure she'd like him. "Will he come?"

"He'll come," said Duke grimly. "He'll want to assess my new wife, how I stand now locally, whether I'm in firm command of my senses or going bonkers, whether my cuffs are frayed around the edges." He laughed. "But if we make the grade with Garson Smelters, Diane—which isn't likely—we could skate in looking like winners. But he's critical. The party must go off smooth as cream. Think you can manage it?"

Diane took a deep breath. It was the first thing Duke had really asked of her, it was important, and it wiped Francie right out of her mind. "I can manage it," she said confidently.

"Good." He seemed to regard the matter as settled.

"Would you like a snack before bed?" she asked.

"No, I ate at the Club."

She felt like she'd been slapped. Ignoring Hilde's invitation, he had dined practically a stone's throw away. And with Francie, no doubt!

"Cobbie and I cornered a couple of proxies," he said. "Small ones, but they all help." And she felt ashamed of what she'd been thinking.

Docilely she followed him upstairs.

"You've taken hold here nicely," he said as, tying the sash of his robe, he came out of the bathroom, his dark hair still damp from the shower. "I was afraid the stories about this place would scare you."

Diane tossed back her taffy hair. "I've heard all of them," she said grimly. "Frosted by tidbits handed down from Frieda's German grandmother."

"She'd have slept a lot easier without that grandmother," he said, and they both laughed. Suddenly the house seemed safe and warm and secure. An ordinary house.

She moved into Duke's arms, felt them warm about her, felt his lips exploring her eyes, her hair, her mouth, as he

swept her up in those strong arms and carried her to the big bed. And lost herself in wanting him, having him.

She was almost asleep when she realized he was flailing around again. He turned and rolled restlessly.

Realizing she must have moved or touched him, she got quietly out of the big bed and stole through the adjoining door, finding her way across the pale green rug in the moonlight, and threw back the green satin bedspread with its monogram "L. MacQ. T." and climbed sleepily into the queensize bed. There was nothing whatever wrong with this house, she assured herself drowsily. Here she was in Lorna's very own bed, perfectly comfortable . . . and drifted off.

She didn't know what it was that woke her. Some sound perhaps that reached into her sleep. She listened intently. There was no sound from the next room. But there was something, something. . . .

A wisp of a sigh reached her and she jerked alert. Something was in here with her!

She felt for the light. No, not the night stand. Where—? She remembered Ginny's words, *if someone is strangling you* . . . and threw her arm convulsively upward to break the beam that would throw the room into brilliant light.

The room remained dark.

But as her arm flailed about, something touched her, a light almost caressing touch. Fingers.

With a scream that tore up from her toes, Diane hurtled out of bed, leaped across the moon-washed rug and collided with a chair. It turned over and she fell, rolling across the soft rug, gasping.

Then Duke was beside her, barefoot. "Diane! What is it?"

"There's someone in here," she cried, clutching him. "I couldn't get the light on, but someone touched me!"

Duke found a wall switch and the room was suddenly awash with light. He swung a look around, padded to the closet, threw the doors open. Only her clothes hung there. He checked the bath.

"Nothing here," he reported.

She noticed then that the hall door stood open.

"Did you come in from the hall?" she asked. "I left the door between our rooms open, but the hall door was closed."

Cat-quick, he dashed into the hall and she heard his orderly search, could tell where he was by the sound of doors

opening and closing. It took quite a while. She leaned against the dresser, feeling weak. They really should call the police. . . .

"No one here. Doors and windows locked," he reported, returning. "What's this about your lights?"

"The headboard beam," she said, still shaky. "I threw my arm up when I heard what sounded like a sigh, and the light didn't come on, but I felt something touch my arm." She shivered. "It felt like reaching fingers."

He crossed to the bed, broke the beam with his arm. Obediently the light went on. "You had a nightmare," he said flatly. "There's nothing wrong with the light. Or perhaps you missed the beam and touched the quilted headboard. The satin might feel a little like skin."

A nightmare. . . . She looked at him disbelievingly.

"Thought you were going to bunk in with me tonight, Diane."

"You were thrashing around. I thought I was disturbing you."

"It's true I have trouble sleeping," he said. "But I understand about nightmares. Time enough to move back in here tomorrow. Come to bed."

Confused, she followed him into his room, but sleep was not for her. At first there had been only Eden. But now a serpent had entered wearing the face of Doubt. She lay awake beside him and asked herself, was Duke, newly returned to Queenscourt, remembering the ghost of vanished summer afternoons with Lorna? Sparkling moments with Francie? And felt Jealousy trace its delicate knives along her heart, looking for some central point to make the final blow.

Outside in the dark hall, she felt, was a whisper of perfume . . . that scent that was so undeniably Lorna's. . . .

Dawn was breaking over Queenscourt before she fell asleep.

Chapter 16

By morning she had reached a decision. She was going to believe—had to believe—that last night's terror was nothing but a very real dream, that there was some perfectly logical, though as yet unrevealed, explanation for the behavior of the shoes. She would forget them, she told herself staunchly as, having seen Duke off in Cobbie's car for town, she washed the breakfast dishes by hand, giving a wistful look to the dishwasher which she wasn't using in order to save electricity.

As she finished, she thought she heard children's laughter in the yard and then a splash, and dried her hands and rushed out to warn them not to go in the pool, it wasn't chlorinated yet. But when she arrived there was only the echo of their laughter and a snicker from behind a bush.

"I know you're here," she called merrily. "Come on out where I can see you!"

And suddenly a stick flew by her head and she heard a crashing in the underbrush as they took to the woods.

She went back inside a little shaken and turned on the handsome TV set in the living room to quiet her nerves. Though she turned a variety of knobs, nothing happened.

She sat down on a velvet sofa and stared at the television set dolefully. It was the finest set with which she had ever had contact—and it refused to work. She sat there tallying up in her mind what a repairman would charge to fix it, decided he'd look around him at this sumptuous room and feel his fortune was made, he could charge them anything. She sat back and tasted defeat. She was sitting in a block-long living room and she couldn't even afford to get the TV fixed.

Kitty called and asked her if she'd like to play golf and Diane, remembering the invitations must go off today, said no and went to rummage in Lorna's handsome French buhl desk in the library.

She found the list readily enough in the top drawer. And

she found something else. An appointment book. She leafed through it curiously. It had names in it. Men's names. Usually during the course of a week some man's name would predominate, just scrawled casually across a page—"Hank" or "Charlie." There were names she was familiar with: "Todd" which could be Kitty's husband, and "Cole" which would be Coleman Vair, and then names she didn't expect cropped up like "Cobbie" and "Ben." And once, a very old entry, "Garson." Garson Smelters?

She put the book down thoughtfully. Perhaps they were not appointments but men Lorna wanted to concentrate on. In that order.

For a cold moment, she could see Lorna, the devil's favorite, sitting in some tropical corner of hell, penning names into a little book with the edges turning black with heat. She could see her name, *Diane*. . . .

She closed the book nervously and walked over to Westwind and told Ginny about the party.

Ginny raised her eyebrows. "The Fourth of July. . . ." she murmured. "Well, I guess Duke thinks there's no time like the present for introducing you to the whole County. I'd have thought he'd have waited until you had regular servants first." She shook her head.

Diane explained her plans eagerly.

"Sounds fine." Ginny studied the list, crossed out a name here and there, added a couple. "I'll help you write the invitations. And Cammie will be available ahead of time and so will Hilde's maid, I'm sure." She looked up with a laugh. "Don't count on any help from the Lingerly girls. Cammie—she's their aunt, you know—told me Sallie Lingerly's newest boy friend gave her the downpayment on a car and they're talking about driving out to Hollywood to break into the movies!"

"Their aunt? But they're so pretty and Cammie's—"

"So homely," sighed Ginny. "But she's the best of the lot. Cammie moved out of the Extension years ago—body and soul. But she has a sister out on the Huntsberry Road who keeps her informed."

Their aunt . . . that meant Cammie was Mattie Sue Lingerly's aunt as well.

"I've a dental appointment. I'm late now. Why don't you join me for lunch at the Club, Diane, around twelve-thirty

and we'll scrounge some help for you in writing invitations?"

"Wonderful," smiled Diane. "I'm off to buy groceries. I haven't begun to stock up."

"The best place for meat," said Ginny authoritatively, walking with her to the door, "is a place called Wylers. It's through town and across the bridge—a long way but worth it. They have wonderful steaks. We buy all ours there. So does Hilde."

And so undoubtedly had Lorna.

Diane watched as Ginny slid into her Mercedes, a slim aristocratic figure in pale gray shantung. So right with her baroque gray pearl earrings. Just looking at Ginny, you knew she didn't wash her own dishes or mop her own floors. Diane thought grimly of all the floors to be mopped—and waxed—at Queenscourt if they were going to give a big party. The road of a do-it-yourself Duchess was not so smooth as that of those born to the role. . . .

She went back through the hedge to Queenscourt, found the car keys where she'd left them on a carved oval table in the hall, tucked her hair back with a pink silk scarf that matched her pink chambray dress and drove into MacQueensport, through the downtown, past the handsome sandstone pile of the Franklyn Library—gift of Latham Franklyn, no doubt—passed the limestone steps that led into the frowning splendor of the big downtown Westwind Hotel, asked at a filling station for directions to Wylers, was told to go down Fulton, turn left at the traffic light and then follow the road on out across the bridge; it would take her there.

She knew where Fulton Street was. It was a fine day and she told herself she wouldn't always have the car—Duke would be using it. So she cruised around the town, trying to familiarize herself with it. This was Duke's country, his home ground, and she wanted to know it as he did—like the back of his hand. With that in mind, she criss-crossed Main Street, drove through a slummy sort of skid-row, took a sharp right into a better street with well-kept little shops and a dotting of restaurants, drove out through a semi-commercial rooming house neighborhood into a section of neat older homes, mostly either red or yellow tapestry brick or white frame with comfortable verandahs, often with low iron fences, some sporting doctors' shingles or chiropractors', with a sprinkling of tourist homes.

And found herself skirting the tall iron fence that surrounded the MacQueensport Cemetery. She slowed the car, watching the tombstones flash by, and on an impulse braked and turned slowly through the open gates, flanked on either side by ivy-covered brick pillars, and cruised down the winding gravel road between the tombstones, to pull to a halt in what seemed the oldest—and wealthiest—part, where tall marble angels and high wreathed spikes and squatting monoliths attested to the power those who lay here beneath the sod this summer's day had wielded in life.

She got out and strolled through the short grass, examining the headstones. Without admitting it to herself, she was looking for just one headstone: Lorna MacQueen Tarrant's.

She passed the Franklyn plot, mossy, somber, austere, surrounded by a low stone fence, the headstones carved from granite with deeply etched comments on life everlasting. And then the Vairs', overrun with ivy, many of the stones quite old with a lot of genealogical information noted precisely on their weathered lichened faces.

And reached a huge stone monolith that said "MAC QUEEN" and she knew she had found what she was looking for. On a lofty marble spire that pointed an accusing finger at heaven, gleaming and looking as if it had been put there yesterday, she read "LORNA MAC QUEEN TARRANT" and the dates. Not "beloved wife". . . .

She frowned and her eye caught another grave some distance away, with a lush green growth of ivy covering it and a basket of fresh pink gladioli. She moved toward it. The Tarrant plot perhaps? No, she was walking past that now. Plain, solid, unpretentious stones. There was the headstone of Duke's uncle, and there his parents with a small etched design of twined roses—beloved husband, beloved wife.

She realized as she reached the pink gladioli that she was now standing in the Westcott family plot, festooned with rather far-fetched angels and a few fat cupids and some urns, but the grave with the flowers had neither cupids nor urns; it was a plain rectangular stone and carved upon it was the legend "MARY JO JERNEY, b. 1900, d. 1917." She bent down and inspected the basket. It had a local florist's label on it and the typed card said simply "T. Westcott."

Diane swallowed. Here among the haughty Westcotts interred forever was Trencherton Westcott's one and only love,

the little kitchen maid who had died of influenza in the great epidemic of 1917, and here fresh and pink and with a typed card was an example of what must be a long-standing order to keep fresh flowers on her grave. Her eyes blurred with tears.

Behind her a voice said, "Wicked of the old coot to plant her here among those who disapproved of her," and she turned to face Coleman Vair.

He looked genial but a bit bleary-eyed. Remembering how he had crashed into his front door last night, Diane inspected his face. It was free from blemish. She decided he had a hard head.

"Where'd you come from?" she asked, dabbing at her eyes.

"I was passing, saw your car and turned in. What are you so choked up about?"

"Uncle Trench," she said. "I didn't know he had it in him."

"We all have it in us," he said in a hard voice, then more lightly, "Want the guided tour?"

She walked beside him across the soft grass to the Vair plot, overgrown with ivy. Cole stood there somberly. "An angel and a devil, side by side," he said softly, and she saw that he was looking at the twin tombstones of his mother and father. He turned to her, his voice savage. "My father had one headstone put up for them both. I had it taken down after he died and put in separate ones. Bad enough they have to lie there side by side." He swung away and Diane followed him, shaken.

"Cole," she said, troubled, "you shouldn't feel so. . . . about the dead, I mean.

"Why?" His laugh jarred her. "You think dying *improves* people? That's something I haven't noticed. There's old Latham Franklyn lying there under that granite stone, grieving that there's some girl whose eyes he didn't black. Or do you think he's changed because there's green grass growing over him?"

"I think he's *dead*, Cole," she said earnestly. "No matter what he did in life, he can't hurt anyone now."

"I wonder. . . ." His gaze swung somberly toward the towering white marble spire that marked Lorna MacQueen's passing and Diane turned away with a shiver. Somehow the

Ohio sun didn't seem quite so bright and the oaks cast longer shadows.

"I didn't see the Cobham graves," she said suddenly. "Isn't Cobbie's one of the old families around here?"

"He's the last of his line," said Cole. "His parents come from St. Louis and he sent them back there to be buried with their kin."

"It's strange he never married."

"He didn't marry because the charming Ginny wouldn't have him," said Cole succinctly. "He carried a torch for years, but I guess it's sort of burned out now that he's getting along."

"I know he's a little older, but he'd have made her a good husband," said Diane reflectively.

"I thought so too," said Cole. "Cobbie's a decent sort. But some women are born to live alone and Ginny Westcott is one of them."

Diane wondered if he were right. Was any woman really born to live alone? she wondered. She matched her steps to his and they walked silently toward their cars, parked close together, and he said, running a distracted hand through his dark hair, "I'm bad company today, Diane. Old ghosts are haunting me..." He turned abruptly. "Where are you bound?"

"The meat market," said Diane.

"Wylers? You're way off track. Want me to guide you in?"

"If you'll guide me back to Fulton Street, I have directions from there and I won't break up your day," she smiled.

He shrugged. "I've nothing to do. Thought I'd play some golf or exercise one of Hilde's horses for her. Ben won't do it."

"Say hello to Topaz for me." Diane got into her car, handed in by Cole, and followed his red sports car down to Fulton Street where he held up traffic as he gestured the way she should go, and she left him with a wave amid a blast of angry horns and drove down Fulton, turning left at the traffic light, and followed the road out across a hideous old iron bridge that spanned a muddy stream. Past the bridge the countryside opened up and it was with surprise that she came upon a white warehouse-type building at a crossroads with "Wylers" painted in black letters across one wall.

She ordered as much meat as she dared, mentally calculat-

ing her budget, paid cash, and the man behind the counter, perhaps because of her chunky diamond ring, thrust forward a price list, said laconically, "For large orders we deliver." He carried the meat, well wrapped, to her car. Times weren't really so good, she saw he was glad to have her account. There were a lot of do-it-yourself Duchesses in the country, she realized, and not all of them were married to Steel Dukes. Oh, well, if she had learned one thing in Virginia, it was to keep up appearances. She waved to the man, who was standing there admiring the long white car, and drove back toward MacQueensport.

Back at Queenscourt the kitchen clock told her it was almost lunchtime. And one of the back kitchen windows told her something else—that there was a grubby little boy standing in the yard, staring solemnly up at the house.

Diane had always liked children. Warned by this morning's episode, she opened the kitchen door warily and went out. The child, who was chewing a piece of sticky candy and was preoccupied with tearing the wrapper free, flashed a look at her. He was thin and tow-headed and pale-eyed and it didn't take genius to see the look of the Lingerly's about him.

"Hello," said Diane gently, before he could run away. "What's your name?" And then as he edged back away from her, she added invitingly, "I have a cookie in here for you."

The child wavered. He planted his feet. His eyes took in Diane's flushed face and pink cotton dress. "You work here?" he asked, awed.

Diane laughed. "Yes, but we don't call it working. I live here. I'm Diane Tarrant."

If she'd expected him to show interest in the new lady of the manor, she was not disappointed. The child swung a vengeful look upward at Queenscourt's steep slate roofs and towering brick chimneys. His fists clenched and his face contorted.

"I hate you!" he shrieked, and throwing the crumpled candy paper on the lawn, ran back into the woods, disappearing into a tangle of beech and dogwood and sycamore.

Appalled, Diane watched his retreat.

The women of Queenscourt, she reflected wryly, were not beloved by the populace. She went to pick up the discarded candy paper and as she straightened up, across the hedge she could see Uncle Trench, lolling asleep in his wheelchair on

the terrace. As she watched, Nora Allerton came out and roused him and wheeled him inside. For lunch, no doubt. Diane sighed. Things moved on such well-oiled wheels at Westwind. She was sure in her heart that no one ever yelled things at Ginny. But then, she told herself ruefully, perhaps Ginny didn't invite it by trying to make friends with small passing strangers.

She cast another rueful look at Westwind. Ginny would be back soon from her dental appointment and would arrive at the Club looking crisp and cool. Diane felt she could not do less. Hot and sticky as she was from driving around town, she ran upstairs to shower quickly and change to a long full-skirted white nubby cotton she had bought in the Islands, with brilliant embroidery splashed down the sleeves. She brushed back her long blonde hair, put a white band around it, slipped her feet into narrow white sandals and hurried down to the car, arriving at the Club just as Hilde and Cole strolled in from the Club stables. They were wearing riding clothes and Hilde was her usual healthy self in a soft green shirt and green jodhpurs to march, while Cole looked rakish and debonair.

The three of them went inside and Ginny waved to them imperiously from a table for two by the windows, motioned a waiter and exchanged it for a table for four—which wasn't easy, the Club being more crowded than usual today—but Diane gathered that special effort would be made for the representatives of Trowbridge Road when they appeared in force.

Eventually seated, with Cole wandering away into the bar, Ginny peered around her and asked Diane, had she met Francie Pelton yet? She was around here somewhere. She'd been here last night and nearly gotten into a fight with Cole, she added, her lips twitching with amusement. And Diane remembered stingingly Duke saying he'd had dinner at the Club and gotten some proxies.

"Cole is old money and Francie is new money," pointed out Hilde. "They tend to clash."

"I haven't met her yet," Diane said in a carefully offhand tone. "Duke mentioned she was back. He said she was a sweet little thing," she lied on inspiration.

Pop-eyed, Hilde choked on her drink.

"*Sweet little thing?*" gasped Ginny. "Is that how Duke sees her?" She burst into uncontrollable laughter. "Francie Pel-

ton," she said when she could speak, "was the only woman Lorna was jealous of!"

"Well, the 'sweet little thing' is coming toward you right now," said Hilde wryly. "Judge for yourself."

Diane turned and saw advancing on them a tall arrogant young woman who swayed on long elegant legs. Her walk was feline, leisurely, as if she padded toward them on sumptuous paws. Her eyes too were feline: long, golden, slightly slanted. Her hair was tawny-red and her smile flashed whitely as she saw them. In her orange and white pantsuit, Diane was reminded of nothing so much as a sabre-toothed tigress.

"Straight from the jungles of New York," muttered Hilde. "And a winner if there ever was one."

The "winner" arrived at their table. "Hello all," she said breezily. "What's new?"

"You are," said Hilde dryly. "We heard you'd been resurrected from the dead but we didn't expect the result to be quite so devastating. Where are your scars?"

"Where they don't show." Francie's brilliant smile flashed. "I had a good doctor."

"And you married him as a reward for his efforts?" laughed Hilde.

Francie shrugged. "Poor Sidney, he just couldn't *keep up*. No stamina. I'm afraid I left him slightly the worse for wear. He'll recover." She sounded bored.

"Perhaps he had other demands on his time," suggested Ginny.

"No, he was shockingly faithful."

"I meant his *work*," said Ginny as Hilde tittered.

"A few operations?" scoffed Francie and looked at Diane, whom no one had remembered to introduce.

"Francie, this is Diane, Duke's new wife," said Ginny hastily.

Francie considered the New Wife. The full weight of that feline gaze with all its golden impact came to rest on Diane. Diane felt those eyes would shine phosphorescently in the dark, two golden lamps. Like a cat's. She could almost feel those claws flex as Francie sank into an empty chair. "I'm surprised he did it," she said frankly.

"Did what?" asked Diane, knowing full well.

"Married again," said Francie. "After Lorna. You don't mind my saying that, do you?"

"Of course not," Diane lied gallantly.

"Duke's very headstrong," laughed Francie. "Whatever he takes into his head to do, he does right then. No waiting, no regrets. Like me. I must say he described you very well, Diane. At lunch today he said he'd turned over a New Leaf, left the Wild World behind and started out with a virgin." Her eyes glimmered with amusement as she considered the New Leaf and Diane felt her cheeks burning with resentment. So he'd lunched with Francie again. . . . "Perhaps I'll decide to go to San Francisco or Seattle and start out again as a virgin," said Francie mockingly.

Convulsed, Hilde choked on an olive and had to be thumped on the back. "Don't say things like that when I'm swallowing!" she gasped.

"Oh, everything is possible," said Francie airily. "I was the original battered bride when I married Sidney—and what I've learned about the Medicine Men from him!"

"They can give you everything but stamina," murmured Ginny.

Francie frowned. "Stamina I don't need," she said. "When others fold up I am just getting my second wind. Well, nice to have met you, Diane. I really must run."

"Do come to see us," said Diane, trying to make her face form a suitable smile.

"At Queenscourt?" Francie tilted her head. "Well, I'll consider it." She left them with a gay wave.

"Francie always scares me," said Hilde. "I have the feeling that if she ever got her teeth into Ben she'd shake him like a rat. Until dead."

"Francie," said Diane with sudden insight, "must have been a great annoyance to Lorna while she lived."

Ginny gave a shout of laughter. "They were wild competitors. Each wanted whatever the other had!"

"Lorna was the better rider," remembered Hilde, stating what she felt was important. "She had the best seat on a horse I ever saw."

"But Francie was a better dancer," said Ginny, remembering. "Used to make Lorna furious. I used to think Francie was the only woman who could fill Lorna's shoes." She stopped abruptly, as if she had gone too far.

Fill Lorna's shoes. . . . Diane's eyes widened. "What size shoe does Francie wear?" she asked suddenly.

Hilde blinked. "I have no idea." She looked at Diane oddly.

"Same size as Lorna, I think," said Ginny. "Why?"

"I thought she might like to *have* Lorna's shoes," said Diane with a toss of her head. "The whole batch!"

"Oh, you mean those lovely shoes you lined up in the attic?" laughed Hilde. "No, I don't think you can push them off onto Francie. All her duds come straight from Paris. Or London. Or Rome. The only cast-off of Lorna's she wanted was—"

Duke, Diane finished the sentence silently.

But someone, she told herself, troubled, had left a size-8 footprint by the swimming pool. Had Francie been in town then? Cole came back from the bar and sat down.

"I must invite Francie to my party," she murmured hating the idea.

"What party?" asked Hilde and Diane told her about the party she was giving at Queenscourt Saturday week."

"You're giving a party Saturday week?" Hilde sounded surprised. "But that's the Fourth of July."

"Yes," said Diane. "Why not?"

There was a sudden silence. Ginny looked sardonic.

Cole looked up over his glass. "Because that's the anniversary of Lorna's death," he said. "Lorna died on the Glorious Fourth."

For a moment a mist seemed to steal over the table, a Presence. It was as if Lorna had called out sharply, *I'll be seeing you. . . .*

"Now there," Ginny nudged Diane, "is someone we can press into service to write invitations. Frieda Payne."

Diane shot a look at Ginny. Her tone had said a lot. She realized there was a definite caste structure among the women here, and that she and Ginny and Hilde and Francie and Emmeline Franklyn and possibly Kitty were at the top of it, while the Frieda Paynes and the Flos and so on were a step below, eager to please the exalted Top Crust. Frieda stopped at their table and Ginny said easily, "How's your writing hand, Frieda? We need assistance!" Frieda volunteered eagerly to help and returned with them to Queenscourt, Diane saying "I can take you home when I go to pick up Duke—no trouble at all."

They were working busily on the long dining room table at Queenscourt, the light from the big crystal chandeliers illumi-

nating the dim paneled room, the creamy vellum notepaper, the gold pens from the jade desk set Diane had borrowed from the library, when a voice from the hall called "Anyone here?"

"In here, Cole," called Diane, recognizing the voice, and when he didn't immediately appear, she had visions of him staggering about, stoned, and breaking a Wedgewood vase. She pushed back her Queen Anne chair, got up with alacrity and found him standing irresolutely in the hall. He looked very upset.

"The door was open," His gaze was accusing.

"I was airing the hall," Diane defended.

"You should keep it locked," he snapped. "'Air' it some other way."

"Well, I don't see—" began Diane, bewildered. She saw he was hiding something behind him. "What's that you've got, Cole?"

For answer, he put a finger to his lips and nodded in the direction of the library. She realized that in the long dining room Ginny and Frieda had grown silent, probably listening. Surprised, she let Cole lead her into the library, watched him close the door behind him.

"I found this wedged in between the bars of your front gate," he said grimly, and thrust a piece of corrugated paper toward her. It appeared to be torn from an ordinary carton box, but lettered on it with a red laundry marker was the single word "MURDERER."

Diane recoiled. "It wasn't there when we came in—I'd have noticed it."

"I walked up here from Hilde's and when I reached the gate, there it was," said Cole. "It looks to me like the work of that bunch down at the Extension. Somebody's crude sense of humor perhaps. Or pure malice."

More likely the latter, thought Diane, staring soberly at the red lettering.

"There were some bad boys over here this morning," she said, remembering the stick thrown at her head.

"I know. I saw Jeff chasing them. But it doesn't seem likely that—"

"It was too early anyway. Unless they came back."

"Anyway," he said uncomfortably, "I would just have thrown it away. Or given it to Duke, but. . . ."

"But what?"

"But I thought Duke might forget to mention it to you," said Cole diffidently.

"You mean," said Diane steadily, "he wouldn't have attached much importance to it?"

Cole cleared his throat. "I thought you should know about it," he said evasively. "So you would keep your doors locked."

"What is it you're trying to tell me, Cole?"

He looked agonized, and suddenly he took her by the shoulders, his voice husky. "I'm afraid for you, Diane."

Her arms tingled under his touch, and she thought the feeling must be fear.

"Why?" she asked, and realized she was whispering. "Tell me why."

He studied her in silence. "To answer that I'll have to say some things you won't like about your husband."

She steeled herself. "Fire away," she said crisply. And when he hesitated, "I won't tell Duke. But why shouldn't I know what you imply all the rest of the County knows already?"

"Why indeed?" mused Cole. "Did Duke tell you Mattie Sue's watch was inscribed 'All my love forever' and that Mattie Sue refused to tell who gave it to her? Even when the police warned her if she refused to tell the Judge she was sure to be cited for contempt? And that Mattie Sue disappeared that night and hasn't been seen since?"

The fear that had only tingled was now a cold river, running through her veins.

"But a new watch had to be bought somewhere," she cried, grasping at straws. "They must know who bought it!"

"Oh, they found out where it was bought, all right. In Huntsberry, a little town about twenty miles from here. The jeweler said he'd sold the watch. To a man who came in alone and paid cash. But the jeweler had just broken his bifocals and all he could be sure of was that the man was tall."

Tall, she thought. Oh, God, Duke is tall.

"The jeweler couldn't pin it on anyone, and when they tested his eyesight at the police station the sheriff said with such vision he'd be lucky to find his way home that night, so there was no question of a lineup or anything." He paused uncomfortably. "But everyone knew Duke bought the watch.

And that Mattie Sue preferred to run away rather than implicate him." He turned away as if he couldn't bear to see the shock that registered on her face. "I don't know what Duke does to women," he said bitterly, "that makes them so unshakably loyal."

"Even if Duke bought her the watch," she said carefully, "it could have been perfectly innocent. *She* could have had the words engraved herself."

"Certainly," said Cole brightly. "She undoubtedly needed a watch to get to work on time. And she used to help out at Queenscourt occasionally when Hilde didn't need her. I've seen her bright face around this old place more than once. So you could say that whether he bought her the watch or not, he's just lucky that she had it on and happened to look at it when he passed by. Duke's had lots of good fortune. His uncle died just as Duke gained the presidency of Tarrant Steel, gave him a free hand. You might even say Lorna died at a fortunate time for Duke—financially. Her shares were just what he needed to beat down a stockholders' uprising."

So there'd been trouble then too. . . .

"But surely she'd have voted them for Duke anyway?"

Cole met her gaze steadily. "Who knows? She told a little group at the Club she wouldn't, that she was pulling her foundry out of the Tarrant Steel combine. Then she drove home and fell down the stairs and bled to death."

The words rocked her. She felt for, and found, support, leaning against a long walnut table, stared at her hands.

"Of course, who knows?" he added cheerfully, "she might have reconsidered. I know I've shocked you," he added soberly. "In a way I hated to tell you this, see all the joy go out of your face."

"Nonsense." She lifted her chin. "I believe Duke's story *exactly* the way he told it. And when Mattie Sue Lingerly turns up, she'll reaffirm everything she said." She'd decided not to listen to any more second-hand slander, but to set her own house aright: First, the shoes. "Cole, would you do me a terrific favor and come up to the attic with me?"

To his surprised look, she said, "I want to chuck all Lorna's shoes into the trash—and I don't want Frieda Payne to know I'm doing it. She'd harangue me about poltergeists!" She tried to laugh, but Cole looked at her seriously.

"That's a good idea," he said. "There's too much of Lorna left in this house. It's pressing on you like a weight."

She wished he hadn't said that as he trailed her to the kitchen. As they passed the dining room door she called, "Coffee soon!" and added loudly, for Frieda's benefit, "Cole, will you help me get this jar open? I've never been much force with lids."

From the kitchen, they made their way swiftly into the little square back hall, up the carpeted backstairs (Lorna had wanted soft-footed servants, thought Diane grimly) and once in the attic Diane pounced on the long row of shoes, feverishly stuffed them into a big box which Cole then lugged down the backstairs. The sound of the back door slamming as Cole carried those shoes out to the trash bin was beautiful to her. Tomorrow was trash collection day and by tomorrow night those hateful shoes would repose on a dump far from Queenscourt—let Lorna go there for them!

She made instant coffee, quickly arranged a plate of cookies, and breezed into the dining room with Cole following.

"Did *those* come in a jar?" Ginny surveyed the cookies with surprise.

Too late Diane realized her mistake. "No, but the coffee did," she said and felt she'd been fast on her feet.

"We thought Cole must be *breaking* the jar," said Frieda. "All that time and then that loud bang."

That would have been the back door slamming. Diane's face pinked. Rather abruptly she thrust the tray at Frieda.

Frieda waved it away. "I'm dieting."

"I'll take one," said Ginny. "Nothing ever adds a pound to my bones." She stretched. "We're almost done, did you know that?"

"I've attended some wonderful parties in this house," said Frieda enviously, looking around her at the rich paneling, the long sideboard with its footed silver tray and ornate chafing dishes.

"And some wild ones," laughed Ginny. "With Lorna you never knew what would happen. She gave one merry little sit-down dinner for twenty-four where she invited couples where the husband was well known to have a mistress—and seated the wife on one side of him and the mistress on the other. You should have seen the red faces! Duke was furious but she didn't care—that was Lorna's style."

Diane shuddered. A lot of people, she thought, must have felt relieved when they heard Lorna was dead and they'd no longer be subjected to that sort of thing.

"*And* she invited Francie to sit on the other side of Duke. . . ." remembered Ginny. "Francie thought it was a great howl."

Diane stared at her.

The phone rang. Diane excused herself and went into the living room to answer it. "Diane?" Duke's voice. "Look, I can't make it home to dinner. Something's come up."

There was the rattle of glasses and a woman's laughter came clearly to her over the phone.

"Where are you?" she asked, her voice sounding sharp.

"In a bar," said Duke irritably. "Where do you think deals are made? In heaven? Cobbie will drop me off. I may be late."

Diane stood with the receiver in her hand and simmered for a moment. She resisted the impulse to bang it down, aware she could be heard from the dining room, arranged her face into a smile and rejoined the group. They all wrote busily.

"Well, that's the last one," Diane laid down her pen and Ginny looked at her watch. "Got to run. The Westwind Hotel's manager is retiring after thirty years and the staff is giving him a farewell party. Some member of the Westcott family always attends those things and since Uncle Trench can't, I'm elected." She hurried from the room.

"I must go too," said Frieda, stretching cramped fingers.

"Just a minute, let me run up and comb my hair and I'll take you home, Frieda," said Diane.

As she ran upstairs, she told herself grimly she'd done two good pieces of work today—she'd gotten the invitations written and Lorna's shoes were at last where they belonged—stashed in the trash awaiting removal.

She was halfway across the bedroom floor before she saw it. Reflected in the mirror of Lorna's beautiful ornate vanity was the queensize bed with its handsome green monogrammed bedspread. And on that bedspread, just where the pillows rose, were Lorna's white gloves and scarf that she had stuffed into a drawer. The gloves were twisted into the scarf like hands and the scarf had a knot in it.

Chapter 17

A scream rose in her throat. White-faced, she dashed into the hall, was halfway downstairs when she plummeted into Cole who was taking the stairs two at a time coming up.

He seized her by the shoulders. "I heard you yip. "What's wrong, Diane?"

Her teeth chattered so she could hardly speak. "It's a garotte. . . ." she whispered. "On the bed. Oh, Cole, it's because . . . she's angry about the shoes!"

"Hush," said Cole. "Big ears are listening downstairs." He walked her into the nearest bedroom, closed the door. "Now what's this all about?"

She told him. Dispassionately, as if she were talking about a third person. She hardly shook at all.

His frown deepened. She felt relief that he didn't demand proof, just accepted the fact that what she told him was true.

"Diane," he said slowly. "I don't pretend to understand what's going on here, but I know this much: If Lorna—wherever she is now—doesn't want you in her house, she'll push you out of it. You haven't a chance against her; nobody ever had. I think you ought to leave here. Today. Now. Pack and go to a hotel, go anywhere, but for God's sake, Diane, just go."

She began to cry. "I *can't* go, Cole. Duke—"

"Duke's a big boy now," Cole said harshly. "He can take care of himself. It seems to me you're the one who needs looking after!"

She couldn't admit their circumstances, even to Cole. Duke's confidences must be kept.

"I can't leave him," she said dully.

"Well, at least get out of the house now," urged Cole, giving her an impatient look. "Drop Frieda off and come back and have dinner at the Club with me."

How would it look, she thought, dining out with Cole? How would it look to Duke, let alone his friends?

He seemed to guess her thoughts. "Too public? Then how about dinner at my house? And afterwards I'll escort you back here and we'll wait for His Majesty to return. O. K.?"

She smiled and wiped her eyes. "O.K.," she said. "Actually I'm famished."

"That's good," he said. "Go wash your face. I'll run down and call Blanchard and tell him to put the kettle on." She'd forgotten that Blanchard was Cole's man-of-all-works who cooked and butted and managed a parade of maids who didn't stay—probably, she thought, because Cole pinched them when he was in his cups.

She washed her face rapidly in the adjoining bath, gave her bright hair a toss and got downstairs in time to hear Cole tell Frieda that Diane thought she'd seen a mouse, and what this place needed was a good cat.

"Try Kitty," said Frieda slyly, and they both laughed.

But the bright speculation in Frieda's eyes as Cole strolled away with a "See you later" made Diane wonder uneasily if dinner with Cole was such a good idea after all. *Well, why not?* she asked herself recklessly. *Since Duke was lunching with Francie Pelton day after day!*

She drove Frieda home to her substantial Dutch Colonial house in MacQueensport, white brick with a steep roof built into steps and a low white brick wall in front, topped by a solid sheet of scarlet petunias. Somehow she'd expected Frieda's house to be gloomy: instead it was bright and sunny and alive with plants.

"Frieda," gasped Diane, "you're living in a greenhouse!"

"It's my German heritage," smiled Frieda. "Did you know the German hausfrau averages something like 27 houseplants? I—" She lifted her head proudly—"have almost 200. But it is my clock collection I would like to show you." And Diane followed her over gleaming random width floors with round sculptured rugs, past wrought iron tables that supported pots and pots of flowers and windows ablaze with red and pink geraniums, to admire a collection of clocks that ranged from tall grandfather clocks to delicate chiming French clocks and the cuckoo clock that had mysteriously stopped the day her grandmother died.

"I like this house," said Frieda, "but it is too close to the

mills. The smoke is bad for my plants. I wish—" her voice was wistful—"that we could afford a house on Trowbridge Road."

Realizing Frieda was serious, Diane forebore saying flipantly, *We'll sell you Queenscourt*, and said instead, "It is lovely there. And I've wonderful neighbors. Ginny . . . and Hilde."

"Hilde is a fine woman," said Frieda. "But she goes through life with her eyes tight shut, I think. She does not see what goes on."

Diane blinked. "What do you mean?"

Frieda shrugged. "Her daughters are not the little paragons she believes them to be."

"And Ben?"

Frieda hesitated. "He seems to me a weak man. As Coleman Vair is weak. And weak men are not always to be trusted. Now Archer," she added proudly, "is a tower of strength. As is Duke. But of course you know that."

"Yes," murmured Diane. "I know that. Ben seems to have no bad habits," she volunteered.

Frieda nodded, her big round eyes fixed on space. "I never trust a man with no bad habits," she said earnestly. I feel they are *there* but . . . hidden. I can trust Archer to do the right thing when my back is turned. I wonder if Hilde can trust Ben?"

Diane didn't know the answer to that, so she changed the subject with, "Have you lived here long, Frieda?"

"I came here ten years ago when I married Archer," said Frieda. "My parents had a dairy farm in Northern Wisconsin. We were snowed in for weeks sometimes in the winter."

And told eerie stories around the fire to entertain each other, divined Diane, amused.

"Do you like living in MacQueensport?" she asked Frieda.

"I find MacQueensport . . . devious," said Frieda frankly. "Nothing is quite as it seems."

Diane decided she'd have to reevaluate Frieda. She was brighter than she'd given her credit for being. "How do you evaluate Kitty?" she asked lightly.

Frieda caught her breath. "Kitty is very entertaining," she said with her precise diction. "I always enjoy her company but . . . I do not always believe all her stories." She looked directly at Diane. "Todd is wrapped up in his work and Kitty

is bored at home. She has no hobbies. I have tried to interest her in gardening, but she does not have—" she smiled—"a green claw."

"Well put," said Diane and, remembering she was to have dinner with Cole, took her leave, driving back to Vair Hall.

On an impulse she drove past the ivy-covered brick gateposts of Vair Hall, past the welcoming shaded driveway of The Elms and bounced over the broken asphalt of the road that led to the Extension. She didn't know quite what she was seeking—certainly not a confrontation with whoever had left a placard on her front gate; perhaps she had some vague idea that if she took them by surprise, there'd be another pretty Lingerly girl standing in the yard . . . Mattie Sue . . . who for some reason had elected to hide away at home all these months, perhaps with some disfiguring skin disease that made her shrink from sight. She really didn't know what she expected to find as she brought the car to a halt at the weed-choked end of the road and stared at the patchwork quilt of shacks before her.

They had not changed since she had sat astride Topaz and considered them in company of Ginny and Hilde and Cole. They were still a slaunchwise group of topsy-turvy dwellings with junk piled high in the yards, broken bottles, beer cans, and hard-packed paths pounded out of dusty grass by children's bare feet. In the yard of the second house, a tar-paper creation with a roof that looked as if it were sliding off, a group of dirty children playing tag stopped as the white car slid to a halt and stood staring. Several dogs barked. But it was the nearest house, which housed the Lingerly family, that held Diane's attention.

On its sagging porch the same young girl who had been rude to Hilde sat drying her long wet yellow hair and reading a magazine. She looked up, gave Diane a look of dislike, recrossed her dungareed legs and turned back to her magazine. Behind her the dilapidated screen door screeched open and an older woman with pale sunken eyes and a once pretty face came out, drying her hands on her apron. She was wearing a faded gingham dress and old pumps run over at the heels. She pushed back a straggly lock of faded yellow hair and stared at the car, parked so near her house, muttered something to the young girl and walked toward the car, considered Diane sullenly.

"You wanted something?" she asked.

"Yes," said Diane, not so sure this was a good idea after all. "I'm Mrs. Tarrant, I live just up the road." She indicated the direction of Queenscourt with a nod.

"I know where you live," said the woman ironically.

Her unblinking scrutiny made Diane nervous. "I'm new here," she floundered, "and I was wondering if any of your daughters might be available for some part-time work?"

The woman stared at her so long that color stained Diane's cheeks. The older woman came forward and thrust her face close to Diane's. "*My girls,*" she said in an insulting way, "don't work for none of you people no more. *Quit asking.*"

Diane swallowed. For a moment she had thought Mrs. Lingerly was going to strike her. Speechless, she watched the thin form whirl and stalk back to the house, heard the screen door bang. Her face crimson, she started the motor, saw the girl on the porch look up with a smirk as the car skidded on the weeds and headed back the way it had come. Diane's heart was pounding. There was more to the Lingerly's dislike than just the jealousy of the "have not's" for the "have's" as Cole had suggested. She was frowning as she pulled up in the driveway at Vair Hall to see Cole lounging in the doorway. He came over and opened her car door for her. He was casually dressed in a pink linen jacket and slacks of a deeper shade.

"I saw you drive past a minute ago," he said, eyeing her narrowly.

"I drove down to the Extension," she said, getting out of the car.

"That can't have been a good idea," he murmured.

"It wasn't," agreed Diane. "I went down to inquire if there might be part-time help. It's a mistake I won't make again."

"Help's hard to come by these days," he said lightly, but she felt uneasily that he saw through her, that he knew she had gone there searching for—what? She couldn't admit even to herself that she was desperately trying to find Mattie Sue Lingerly to hear her corroborate her story, to hear her say the watch had been given her by somebody else, to hear—she turned to Cole, a note of desperation in her voice. "Friends are hard to come by too. I'm glad to have you for a neighbor."

Her voice rang with sincerity and her handsome host

looked a little abashed. He ushered her through his front door with some fanfare, and she glanced at that door for dents or scratches—mementoes from the time Cole must have crashed into it—but like its owner, it appeared unmarred.

She found him a delightful host. And Vair Hall enchanting. Its ivy-covered brick exterior concealed a number of squarish rooms, she discovered, with handsome carved mantels displaying Civil War swords, Spanish American War relics. Family portraits looked out of deep-set oval frames encrusted in gold leaf. Rich red Oriental rugs covered the dark-varnished random width flooring. There wasn't a chair you couldn't sit in comfortably, and the books that lined the wall looked worth reading. A civilized house, she thought, for civilized people. And felt admiration for those older Vairs who had built this house, furnished it, lived in it.

After a brief tour of the house, Cole took her to the living room for cocktails. The living room was on the side of the house that faced The Elms and Diane wondered briefly if Hilde had seen her drive in. Drink in hand, Cole escorted her to the music room, sat down at the piano with a roguish look and sang her a barroom ditty to the accompaniment of his tinny jazz playing. "The one thing I learned to do well in college," he said wryly, "was to beat out old jazz tunes."

"You should have been a musician," she said warmly. "You have a real talent."

"That," said Cole, "would have sent my father into apoplexy. He had only one thing in mind for his son: Business. Big, big business. It was an obsession with him. I had that dinned into me from the time I was able to talk."

"How did your mother feel about it?"

He looked away. "Mother," he said, "was completely crushed in this house. Stultified. She never opened her mouth. Spoke when spoken to. The old man broke her spirit right away. He couldn't break mine," he added grimly. "I didn't fit the mould. Took after my maternal grandfather. He didn't fit the mould either. Left a promising brokerage business and took off with a paintbrush and a pretty secretary for Capri. And vanished from history." He gave her an owlish look. "Left alone I'd probably have done the same thing. With a guitar. Or a slide trombone."

"But your thing's the piano," she protested. "Aren't they harder to lug around?"

"The piano was mother's idea. A sop to the old man. More conventional, she thought. I'd as soon have been a country music guitar player, wanted to write my own music." He sipped his drink thoughtfully. "Might have made a fortune at it. Look at some who have." He set down his glass. "I have a feeling Blanchard's ready with dinner. I see him lurking near the door."

They crossed the wide hall to the dining room. Obviously, Blanchard was always ready to dispense instant hospitality at Vair Hall; a sudden dinner for two did not perturb him. It was served on the Sheraton dining table that had belonged to Cole's grandfather. The heavy silver, the handsome Haviland china were all heirlooms. From over the fireplace in a large walnut frame, Cole's maternal grandmother gazed down—a tall slender imperious woman in a sweeping hat and the bustle and ruffles of the Gay Nineties.

"You look like her," she told him.

"You think so?" Cole looked boyishly pleased. "She's my favorite family portrait. I never knew her, but I'd have liked to. See that expression? Bet she knocked everybody out of her way!"

"How disrespectful of you!" laughed Diane.

"Being dead doesn't make a person any better—or any worse," he said soberly. "Take you, you're scared as hell that Lorna's stalking you around the halls at Queenscourt ready to garotte you when you're not looking."

"Please," said Diane, appalled.

After dinner he looked at the portrait thoughtfully. "There may be Ghosts Who Walk. I wouldn't know, never saw any. But . . ." he frowned, "that doesn't mean they aren't there."

"If I really thought that," said Diane in a voice that quivered, "I'd never sleep again. I keep telling myself there's some perfectly natural, logical explanation for it all."

"What I'm trying to say," he said earnestly, "is that it doesn't matter whether there's a logical explanation or not. What counts is how you feel about it. And you're scared silly."

Diane laid down her fork. "I most certainly am not scared silly," she said firmly. "I was just—" she groped for a word.

"Momentarily deranged," he supplied cynically and she glared at him.

"I'm going to overcome it," she stated.

He stared at her, his eyes wide. "Now that," he said softly, "is the wildest remark of the season. Bar none."

"If you're only going to scold me," she said sulkily, "you might as well take me home."

To her surprise, he rose with alacrity. "Only we'd best use your car," he said with a grin. "I don't mind walking back, but think what Duke would say if he found his car was parked in my driveway all night!"

Diane laughed nervously. She was beginning to regret this adventure.

When they pulled into the moonlit driveway at Queenscourt, came to a halt before the big and somehow threatening dark house, he laid a hand on her wrist. "Diane. . . ." There was a new sound in his voice. "I'm really worried about you, you know."

She felt a rush of warmth welling up in her. "I know."

His fingers tightened on her wrist, and for a moment there was something in his eyes. . . . "No," he said. "You don't know anything about it. . . ." He let her go, accompanied her inside, into the big living room where she mixed him a drink.

Through the open windows she saw the lights were burning at Westwind. Was Uncle Trench up and spying on them? She drew the drapes before she sank down to enjoy her drink with Cole.

Cole had turned on the stereo and the Song of India was pouring magically over them when she looked up and saw Duke standing in the living room door. He saw Cole and a new expression came over his face. "Nice to see you, Cole," he said. "I see you're keeping my bride entertained."

"Better than that," grinned Cole. "I'm feeding her. Putting some meat on her bones. Don't you think she's a bit scrawny?"

"No, I think she's exactly right," said Duke critically, *Up to now*, his tone implied. Diane flushed.

"Well, I must toddle off home." Cole rose.

Diane rose too. "Thanks for everything, Cole," she said warmly. "I'll see you out." And returned to find Duke looking at her quizzically.

"Where did Cole take you?" he asked. "I didn't see you at the Club."

So that was where he had been! With Francie, no doubt!

"Blanchard fixed us something," she said airily. "Vair Hall runs like a clock."

"I didn't know," he said drily, "it had so much attraction for you."

She gave him a level look. "I am left alone a lot."

"That's true." He was thoughtful. "Can't be helped, Diane." He sighed. "Anyway, it will be over soon—one way or another."

"Cole mentioned there'd been a stockholder uprising a couple of years ago."

"Well, he should know," said Duke pleasantly. "He led it."

"What was it about?"

"Pollution controls," said Duke carelessly. "I saw what was coming and put them in ahead of time. Cole, et al., thought I was frittering away the company's money and should wait until forced. I bulled it through and it turned out I was right, it was cheaper in the end. Lord, I'm tired. Ready for bed?"

"As soon as I empty this ash tray."

"Oh, one more thing," said Duke casually. "I'm bringing Francie around tomorrow. She's thinking of buying the house."

Diane stopped what she was doing and stared. "Buying Queenscourt?"

"That's right," said Duke grimly. "She has the ready cash if she wants to part with it."

"But . . . I thought you wanted to keep it."

"Not half so much as I want to get control of Tarrant Steel again." His eyes were cold. "If I don't, I could lose Queenscourt too, the works."

So it was that close, she thought, her heart pounding.

"What makes you think Francie would buy it?"

"She's looking for a big place with land. I've been taking her around to see available houses, trying to talk her into buying this one. Be nice to her, Diane."

It was an order, direct. She bit her lip and turned away so he wouldn't see the flaring anger in her eyes.

"Even if she doesn't buy the house, we still need her," he said.

"Why?" Her voice was brittle.

He frowned. "Lorna's father owned the foundry. Lock, stock and barrel. It was what they call a 'family held' corporation. When he died he left all he had to Lorna—with the

stipulation that if she died before she was thirty-five the foundry was to pass to her cousin Francine—he liked Francie. Francie took that fall from a horse right after Lorna died and she was in bad shape, not expected to live. She'd given me her Power of Attorney to transact her business, vote her stock for her. When she married her doctor, she rescinded that Power of Attorney and gave it to him. Now she's divorced and she's rescinded it again. She votes her own stock."

"Which means," murmured Diane, "that you no longer have control over the foundry."

"That's right. Not to mention the bloc of 20,000 shares of Tarrant Steel common that she owns outright. I thought, of course, she would give me her proxy right away but . . . she hasn't."

Perhaps, thought Diane uneasily, Francie was making conditions. Like . . . *Love me, Duke. Make me first in your life.*

"She'll come around," he said. "She's fractious but she always comes around."

Well, she was coming around. Tomorrow.

Upset about Francie, she entirely forgot the gloves and scarf arranged like a garotte on her pillow. Until she switched on her bedroom light. It was then, as she looked at the great bed with its green satin bedspread, that she remembered.

The bed was empty.

Her eyes widened. With Duke whistling in the next room, she flew to the bureau drawer where she had first put the gloves and scarf. There they lay, exactly as she had placed them, two white gloves and a monogrammed scarf, neatly folded. She pushed the drawer shut with trembling hands and stared, white-faced, into the mirror.

Was she losing her mind? Had she only dreamed it?

Afraid to go to bed, she spent a long time soaking in her bath and when she finally came out, she could hear Duke snoring in the next room. Reluctant to get into that bed, she sat up in a chair reading until morning. Not till dawn broke, did she crawl into bed.

When she woke the sun was beaming through the windows, pouring its golden light across the pale green Kerman rug. She jumped up and looked out the window. She had left Duke's car in the driveway last night; it was gone. He had gone out without waking her.

She sighed. She'd like to have given him breakfast. Well,

there was no way to make up for that now—except to make dinner with Hilde and Ben tonight a thing of beauty.

But first she meant to put Lorna's scarf and gloves in the trash alongside the shoes. As she opened the drawer, she heard the trash truck lumbering out of the drive. She had missed it! Frowning, she closed the drawer. No point making a trip to the trash bin just with these, they wouldn't go out till next trash day anyway. She steeled herself as always to walk down the long dim corridor and hurried a bit when she reached the stairs. But once in the big bright kitchen everything was all right again. Lorna's ghost didn't hang around kitchens, she told herself, Lorna was the drawing room type!

After breakfast she plunged into preparations for dinner. She planned to have fried chicken, mashed potatoes, big green peas, sliced tomatoes on crisp lettuce, a big gravy boat afloat with chicken gravy, biscuits and green apple pie. Let others be gourmet cooks. Tonight they'd enjoy dinner Virginia style.

She had just gotten her hands and arms nicely covered with flour from kneading pastry dough for the apple pie when she heard in the distance the sound of the front door closing and laughter, a man's and a woman's, spilling into the hall. She froze in consternation. She'd forgotten Francie!

Quickly she rinsed off the flour, tore off her apron, gave her hair a pat, forced a bright smile to her lips, and marched in to confront the enemy.

Chapter 18

Francie stood in the hallway, a tawny figure in a deep gold pants suit, her bright hair swinging, her face turned up to Duke's, laughing at something he'd said. She swung around and her eyes narrowed as Diane entered.

"Here's Diane," said Duke unnecessarily. "She'll show you round."

Francie cocked her head. "I imagine I know this house better than Diane does. Every little corner."

Diane flushed. "Would you like to just wander through? Nothing's been changed really."

Except the occupant, Francie's raised eyebrows said. She turned to Duke. "No, I don't think I care to prowl *these* rooms alone. Duke, why don't you do the honors?"

With a warning look at Diane, whose smile had become rather fixed, Duke stepped forward. "You remember the downstairs, Francie?"

"Oh, yes, I remember it well. And this hallway too. . . ." Francie's eyes rested somberly on the newel post. She moved toward it warily. Diane sensed a tension in her, as if she expected something to spring out at her. It made her own flesh crawl, just watching Francie's wary progress upstairs.

The phone rang. Cobbie's voice said, "Diane. I need to speak to Duke urgently."

Diane ran to the hall. "Duke," she called. "Cobbie's on the phone, says it's urgent."

Duke, at the head of the stairs with Francie, said, "Look around, Francie. I'll be right back," and sprinted downstairs to the library, shut the door. He talked a long time. Diane set out glasses, mixed drinks, thinking sardonically that everything had its compensations—Duke was keeping Francie cooling her heels upstairs while he talked to Cobbie.

When Francie came downstairs again, to stroll into the living room and sink down into an olive green velvet chair—

which, Diane noted grimly, set off her gold pants suit to perfection—and gracefully accept the drink Diane proffered, Francie said with an uneasy laugh, “I don’t know, I’ll have to think about it, Duke. Perhaps it’s just because you *haven’t* changed anything, but I feel as if . . . as if Lorna has never left this house.”

Diane stiffened.

Duke said evenly, “Lorna is dead, Francie. Decorations are a matter of taste. You could chuck everything out and start again.”

“Yes, that’s so, of course,” Francie dropped her eyes, and Diane, watching her, felt that Francie was afraid. “I rode by,” she said suddenly, “and looked up at the house. I saw you looking out the window, Diane.”

So the woman who had sat motionless on the big black horse had been Francie!

“Surely you’re not riding Satan!” protested Duke.

“Indeed I am,” said Francie sturdily. She tossed her head. “When I arrived, I didn’t let anybody know I was here. I stayed at a motel in Huntsberry and stopped by the Club stables two different days and bribed a stable boy to lead Satan through the underpass so I could ride him through your woods. The first day I just cantered around to get him used to me again. But the next day I jumped the ravine!” Her challenging gaze met Duke’s and with a sinking heart Diane saw admiration leap into Duke’s eyes. A wild reckless woman had been his first love, she remembered bitterly. And here was a second.

“You were a damn fool, Francie,” he said a little huskily.

She tossed her head. “I had to know if I’d lost my nerve. And I didn’t want an audience in case I chickened out.”

“You could have ended up in the ravine with a dozen broken bones—alone.”

She shrugged.

“Are you really O. K. now, Francie?” pursued Duke. “That was a nasty fall you took. For a while we thought we’d lost you.”

“It was bad enough,” she agreed. “Yes, I’m fine except I still get roaring headaches. Aspirin doesn’t faze them at all. My latest Medicine Man has given me some knock-out pills for them. He’s warned me to take only half a pill at the most—two would be committing suicide, I presume.”

Abruptly, Duke brought the conversation back to Queenscourt. "You know the boundaries, I take it?"

"I'm not sure," Francie studied her glass.

"On this side—" he waved a hand—"we're bounded by Westwind's hedge. On that side past the stable we go all the way to the underpass. The long meadow across the road clear down to The Elms—it's under long lease but it belongs to Queenscourt. And all the back, the woods, the bridle paths, nearly up to the Extension, that's Queenscourt land."

Diane caught her breath. Wherever she walked, at front or back or toward the Club, unless she trespassed on Ginny's property or Cole's or Hilde's, belonged to Queenscourt. And Queenscourt had belonged to Lorna . . . Queenscourt and everything on it.

"I'd forgotten it was so huge." Francie glanced around as if the atmosphere of the house oppressed her. And jumped up as soon as she'd finished her drink with a merry, "I must run. Nice of you to give me the Guided Tour."

"Anytime, Francie," said Duke equably. "Can I drop you off somewhere?"

"The Club would be fine." Francie shot an amused look at Diane.

Biting her lip, Diane watched them sweep out. They looked, she had to admit, remarkably good together. Both tall with a swinging gait. No wonder people thought. . . .

She turned away, quickly tied her apron on again and busied herself with making pies. She mustn't think that. She mustn't ever think that. Abruptly her eyes filled with tears and she banged a pan down on the counter harder than was necessary. She could have done without Francie Pelton on this of all days.

She made three pies—one for dinner, one for Hilde to take home, one to take to Ginny. She decided against making one for Cole—left to his own devices he probably drank dinner anyway. And comforted herself that at least Francie had cleared up the identity of the lone horsewoman. Probably, she told herself, pushing back her hair with a floury hand, everything that had happened here had as rational an explanation. Then she concentrated on making everything perfect for this, her first dinner party as Mrs. Duke Tarrant.

She was determined to serve dinner in the vast dining room so she could accustom herself to its size, its magnificence. But

four places spaced around that enormous table looked ridiculous, so she decided to serve buffet style and let people sit where they liked. Also it made the lack of a maid less obvious.

She stared around her gloomily. The opulence of that room—recalling the days of platoons of servants—depressed her immeasurably. One puny woman, she thought, afraid to sleep at night and struggling to polish all that silver, keep all that crystal sparkling, dust all that furniture—and having to pretend it was *fun*. And then march out to face the sleek perfumed rested Francies of the world. . . . It wasn't fair!

She jumped up and rushed out to the kitchen to vent her anger on the inoffensive biscuit dough.

She took the pies out of the oven and sat down and thought about the things that had happened here. Shoes didn't move around by themselves. Or gloves. Or scarves. She wasn't going to find any "reasonable explanations." *Face it*, she thought grimly. *This house is haunted. By Lorna.*

She leaned her elbows on the table. *If I could only learn enough about the people who lived here*, she thought soberly, *find out what made Lorna what she was . . . would she perhaps go away and leave us alone? Is it understanding she seeks?*

With the hot pies cooling on the kitchen table, she glanced out the kitchen window and saw, through the break in the hedge, Cammie emerge onto the terrace of neighboring Westwind.

Cammie! That was it. Stiff at first, Cammie had gotten friendlier as she worked, cleaning up Queenscourt. She'd be a mine of information!

With the apple pie on a Wedgewood plate, she hurried across the lawn to Westwind, found Cammie cutting some roses from a bush near the hedge.

"I wish we had roses like those at Queenscourt," she said enviously.

Cammie turned and smiled at her. It occurred to Diane that Cammie was an outdoor woman whose personality flowered in sunlight. "Oh, but you did. This bush grew from a cutting from a Queenscourt rose. Of course, yours are all gone now."

"What happened to them?"

"Miss Marnie 'pruned' them one day," said Cammie, frowning. "At ground level. In July."

"But that's crazy," Diane gasped. "Did they die?"

Cammie nodded her head solemnly. "Every one. Miss Lorna near had a fit. She was little then. She liked the roses. But when she grew up she didn't seem to care about flowers."

Diane took the plunge. "Cammie, what was Marnie MacQueen like?"

Cammie turned to her in surprise. "Why, she was crazy, Mrs. Tarrant."

"Yes, but . . . crazy in what way? What form did her insanity take?"

"Why, she took five or six baths a day, and she'd sit and cut up her dresses with the scissors unless somebody hid them. Make paper dolls out of them. Left them all over the floor. All that lovely satin and lace and velvet and what all. That's why Mr. Ronald put that big lock on the attic door. Miss Marnie used to cut up Miss Lorna's clothes too, and tear up her toys, and Miss Lorna would have a fit. . . . So her father built the first of the closets and gave her the key to the attic. Gave her a lock for the closet in her own room too, so's her mother wouldn't cut up her clothes."

"I see." Diane frowned. She pictured the unhappy child, fingering the chopped up pieces of fabric that had been a loved frock. "What—other things did she do, Cammie?"

"Oh, silly things mostly. Nothing—dangerous. Except once. She threw something at Miss Lorna. One of them branched candlesticks with lighted candles. I remember Miss Lorna was wearing a big full-skirted organdy dress and the candles just missed her. She went white as a sheet. I guess she knew how close she'd come to being set afire. Come to think of it, she never wore organdy again. Or anything sheer. I guess she thought how easy it would be to burn to death. But mostly Miss Marnie was peaceful-like. She talked to herself—and when Miss Garnet came, she talked to her. She laughed a lot, like insane people do."

Diane's flesh crawled. She had heard that laugh. A sort of cackling mindless hysteria.

She said with an effort, "Marnie MacQueen never—hurt anybody then?"

"Well, not as I know of. But she weren't a normal mother, Mrs. Tarrant. She didn't like Miss Lorna. And Miss Lorna didn't like her. Sometimes Miss Marnie would get mad and scream that Miss Lorna wasn't her child, she'd never had a

child. And the time she threw the candlestick, that time Miss Lorna ran out screaming Miss Marnie wasn't her mother, she didn't have a mother."

Diane flinched. A terrible household to grow up in, and bound to leave its mark.

"Well, after Marnie MacQueen died," she pursued, "and Mr. Ronald MacQueen married her divorced sister Garnet, weren't things better for Lorna?"

Cammie reflected. "In what way, Mrs. Tarrant?"

"Well, didn't the second Mrs. MacQueen treat her better?"

Cammie looked grim. "Miss Garnet, she either didn't pay no attention to Miss Lorna or she taunted her something spiteful. She was worst when she got Miss Francine's letters."

"Letters? Didn't Francie live there?"

"No, ma'am. The divorce, you know—Miss Garnet's husband got custody of Miss Francine, so Miss Francine was only here for three weeks in the summers. Miss Francine and Miss Lorna didn't get along and, of course, Miss Garnet, the second wife, she sided with her own daughter, and that left Miss Lorna, her being only a stepdaughter, out in the cold."

"But surely Lorna's father—"

Cammie swung around defiantly. "Mr. Ronald was a fine man, but he was busy. He didn't spend much time at home."

"Didn't he love Lorna?"

"Yes, I'm sure he did, but like I say, he just wasn't *there*."

He just wasn't there. And Lorna had grown up in a cold, cold house, and when she was grown she'd made it a cold, cold world. After all, it was what she was used to.

"It must have been hard working there, Cammie," said Diane slowly. "With all that going on."

"Oh, it was kind of interesting," said Cammie surprisingly. "Like watching those soap operas on television. You never knew what would happen next but there was sure to be something. And Miss Marnie took a lot of trips. I think mostly they were just times Mr. Ronald put her in the asylum for short periods when she got so bad, and he covered it up by saying she was taking a 'trip.' But sometimes he went with her. Like the time they went to Europe. Gone almost a year. Miss Lorna was born on that trip. They brought her back with them."

"Perhaps she wasn't so bad then. . . ." murmured Diane.

"She was always bad," said Cammie, giving the rosebush a

vicious jab with the shears as she stuck her finger. She sucked her finger so that her next words were hard to understand. "I was gone all that year myself, taking care of my grandmother. She was dying by inches down in Arkansas. And I got back the day before they did. Miss Marnie was bad when she arrived. Wouldn't look at the baby. She was crazy as a girl, but pretty—like these flowers." She snipped another rose. "So people passed it off as wildness. I was just a child then, but I recognized she was 'different.' Men couldn't see it. They all chased her. She laughed a lot and sometimes she'd get hysterical and have to leave the room. But her mother got her married off to Mr. Ronald, the best catch in town. They weren't local people, moved here from New Orleans. And I guess Mr. Ronald found out on his honeymoon what she was like because it was a long time before he took her on a trip again. It must have been a surprise to them when Miss Lorna was born. She was getting kinda old then and I guess they'd given up having any. Miss Garnet was a lot younger."

"Were they alike—Marnie and Garnet?"

"Oh, not for looks, but in some ways. They was both good looking women, but Miss Garnet was real off on men. She just didn't have it in her to be faithful to one man. The newspaper stories about her divorce were just scandalous. And of course, Miss Garnet's husband got custody of Miss Francine, and Miss Garnet came out here after the divorce. She wore little black dresses and her hair brushed back plain and short, and she was so good to Miss Marnie—always talking to her. And I guess she fooled Mr. Ronald because he married her right after Miss Marnie died." She thought about that, her head cocked on one side. "It surprised me," she admitted frankly, "because I thought he'd got her number right enough."

"But apparently he didn't," mused Diane. "Love is a strange thing."

"It sure enough is," said Cammie feelingly, snipping another rose. "Miss Garnet sure was a bad one. *Bad*. You know why she fired me? I was living over on the Huntsberry Road with my sister June at the time and Jeff was driving me to work, but that morning Jeff dropped me off at the Extension so's I could tell my *other* sister that we'd had a letter that ma was took real bad, and on my way down to Queenscourt Miss Garnet passed me with Miss Lorna's dog on a leash—I was

surprised because nobody at Queenscourt ever got up that early and I never knew Miss Garnet to walk Miss Lorna's dog before, but she says, 'Why, good morning, Cammie,' as sweet as could be. And a couple of hours later she comes storming into the bedroom where I was working and accused me of spying on them, reading their letters, and *fired* me!" She looked indignant. "And I left and then the dog was found. Poisoned. *She* poisoned that dog and she didn't want me around to tell Miss Lorna I'd seen her with him. Thinking back, I guess Miss Garnet must have been as crazy as her sister only I just didn't see it."

And this was the woman for whom Ronald MacQueen had blown out his brains on a summer night. . . .

"That was an awful time," remembered Cammie solemnly. "Miss Garnet fired me and Jeff quit, and then the next day Miss Garnet got herself run over in the road."

"And Ronald MacQueen killed himself that night. . . ." murmured Diane.

"Didn't neither," sniffed Cammie. "He was cleaning his gun and it went off accidental, that's all."

Diane stared into that ravaged loyal face. Cammie couldn't admit even to herself that Ronald MacQueen was a suicide . . . she loved him. All these years and she still loved him.

Stung by something in Diane's expression, Cammie declared scornfully, "Mr. Ronald wouldn't blow his brains out for *her*. They weren't no lovin' pair!"

"What do you mean, Cammie?"

"I mean Miss Garnet and Mr. Ronald kept separate rooms and talked polite to each other at table but they were always—kind of hostile, I thought. Sort of watched each other with their eyes. Made you nervous kind of. I thought . . ." she said haltingly, "he'd be *glad* she was dead, the way she treated him and Miss Lorna. Jeff had brought me back for my things the day after I was fired and it was us who found her, lying there in the road. We were standing there wondering what to do when Dr. Spicer came tearing down the road—nearly run us down—he was on his way to The Elms, they'd just called him that Latham Franklyn had had a stroke. I was so excited I run down to Queenscourt clear up to the second floor before I got hold of myself and went down and told Mr. Ronald in the library how we'd found Miss Garnet run over and how I'd waked Miss Lorna up and told

her. He looked at me real steady and kind of sad and said, 'Thank you, Cammie. You've done all you could.' And those were the last words he ever said to me. I heard next morning how he died." She bent her head over the roses.

A Mercedes started down the drive.

"Is that Ginny?" cried Diane. "I have this pie—"

"No, that's Jeff," said Cammie. "Taking the car out to get the oil changed. He does that." She snapped a pink rose with her shears and held it out. "Would you like a rose for your hair, Mrs. Tarrant?"

Diane smiled and took the offering, held out the Wedgewood plate. "I brought a pie for Ginny. She's certainly lucky to have you, Cammie. I wish you worked for me."

Cammie took the pie carefully. "Oh, I got lots of memories of that house, Mrs. Tarrant." She slanted a look upward at Queenscourt's high walls and steep roofs. "And not all of them pleasant, but I guess I'm just as well where I am. House is smaller and I'm not getting any younger." With a sigh, she looked around her at the lovely summer weather, and clutching the pie and her armful of pink roses, trudged toward the side door of Westwind.

Diane went back to Queenscourt.

She was cleaning the trophy room, carefully taking down the tall silver cups, putting them on a big tray and carrying them to the kitchen and washing them, when Cammie rang the doorbell, returning the plate on which Diane had sent the pie—only now it was piled high with hot cross buns.

Thanking her, Diane said Cammie was just the person she wanted to see, there was a light out over the stove, it must be a fuse—but where was the fuse box?

"Jeff always put in the fuses when I worked here," said Cammie. "I'll send him over. He'll know where it is." She lingered in the doorway. "I remember the day they brought Miss Lorna through this front door," she said. "I was standing right where you are, Mrs. Tarrant, and Mr. Ronald came in looking happy with the baby in his arms and he said 'Hullo, Cammie, this is my daughter Lorna.' And Miss Marnie was walking along sulky behind him and when he said that she let out a scream and threw her coat down on the floor and ran down the hall crying. Mr. Ronald was upset and he shoved the baby into my arms and took off down the hall after his wife. And I held Miss Lorna in my arms," said

Cammie softly. "And it was just like she was *my own child*."

Looking at Cammie's rapt face, Diane's eyes smarted.

Abruptly Cammie roused herself from her reverie and departed. A few minutes later Jeff, tall and stooped, knocked on the kitchen door and led Diane to the back stairway which opened conveniently from a little square hall off the kitchen. "Fuse box is there, Mrs. Tarrant. Behind the door." And changed the fuse for her.

Diane thanked him warmly and watched him go. It struck her that dour Jeff with his melancholy features like an elderly bloodhound was a little sinister looking.

She couldn't believe it when, just before the Harrises were due to arrive, Duke phoned and said tersely there was some trouble at the MacQueensport plant, he and Cobbie were going to check a couple of bars and find out what was going on.

"But Hilde and Ben are due any minute!" she wailed. "And what will I do for a fourth for bridge after dinner?"

"Call Ginny," he said. "Call Cole. Improvise."

"I'll save you a drumstick," she said bitterly, and hung up. She looked down at her dress, the prettiest she owned, thought of her spic and span house, her good dinner, felt her very bones aching from all the polishing, cooking and cleaning—and lifted her head rebelliously and called Cole, who promised to trundle right over.

If Ben and Hilde were surprised at their substitute host, they didn't show it. Hilde said it looked like they'd have a storm tonight, just feel this weather, and Diane looked at her sharply. But Hilde's face was bland and Diane, agreeing the heat was oppressive, asked Ben to open some windows.

"I haven't seen Cole on such good behavior for ages," murmured Hilde as she said good night. "You're adapting very well." *Perhaps too well*, her tone implied.

"I'll stay and help Diane clean up," Cole said happily.

Hilde paused in the doorway and studied him. "Better get a maid," she muttered.

Cole laughed but Diane felt she had been warned.

The Harrises gone, Cole helped her carry the dishes out to the kitchen.

"What's a stockholders' meeting like, Cole?" she asked him curiously. "I've never attended one."

"Well, I can tell you what Tarrant Steel's stockholders'

meetings are like," he said with a harsh laugh. "A lot of people's ideas are put forward and unless Duke is for them, they're vetoed down. The slate Duke puts forward is voted in. Always. Cobbie stands up in his dignified way and nominates. Trencherton Westcott is wheeled in, waving to everybody, and votes for whatever Duke wants. So does Todd Feverell. And all the rest. Me too, for that matter."

"You sound like you don't approve."

"Oh, I suppose I approve." He ran a hand through his dark hair. "It's just that we all run along like a bunch of sheep doing whatever Duke wants. Except for that one ruckus over pollution it's always been that way."

The natural leader, she thought, and felt a tingling pride.

"So Duke's way is *our* way," he added ironically. "Right or wrong."

"What would you have done differently," she challenged, "if you'd had the chance?"

"Ah, that's the sixty-four dollar question," said Cole. "I've asked myself that on gloomy winter nights with the snow howling around. Coleman, I've said to myself, suppose it were Vair Steel instead of Tarrant Steel, where would you be taking the company?" He laughed. "And the answer comes back to me, probably not to trebling the dividend or splitting the stock. But there'd have been a damn sight gayer atmosphere around the board room!" He set down the dishes he was carrying and smiled down at her. He was standing very close. "Prettiest girl in seven counties," he murmured and she felt her heart beat a little faster.

"Cole," she said hastily, to head him off. "There must be some folding party chairs around here, but I haven't found any."

"To the basement!" he said, grasping her hand.

Diane had never been in the basement before. It had not attracted her. It was concreted but plain, lit by weak unshaded bulbs. She followed Cole through a bewildering succession of drab rooms until he opened a door and said, "There!"

She was looking at a veritable treasure trove for party givers. There were stacks of folding chairs, folding tables, striped umbrellas, strings of colorful paper lanterns with long, long extension cords for use outdoors, stacks of trays, platters, candles. Diane gasped with delight, went over to make a

rough count of the gilded folding chairs. There'd be enough!

"Do you think I'd have time to re-gild some chairs before the party?" she asked when they were back in the long lighted living room, the arched windows with their undrawn drapes like black mirrors reflecting the wall brackets.

He began to laugh. "Duke doesn't deserve you. Why not rent some? There's a handy caterer in town."

She bit her lip. "I like to do things myself."

"Need a good brush hand?" he asked lazily.

Diane smiled. "If I can find some paint."

"The new Mrs. Tarrant," he mused. "New and fresh as paint herself. Duke was lucky to find you in the Islands. You might not have married him if you'd known about—all this."

She gave him a sharp glance. "I'd have married him," she said briskly. "Anytime, anywhere."

He quirked a look at her. His silence was very loud. *Liar*, it said, *liar, liar*. . . . He reached out and touched her hair. "I was going to hell in a handbasket before you came," he mused. She moved restively and his voice intensified. "Diane, don't cast me out. I'm not much good, I never was much good but—knowing you has made a difference."

She said troubled, "If you say things like that, people will think—"

"I don't care what the hell they think," he said thickly.

And suddenly she was in his arms.

"Cole!" She pushed him away, went over and hurriedly drew the drapes. She could imagine what Uncle Trench would make of this!

"Sorry," he said. "I'm a little drunk and I mistook you for my dream girl. You look very like her. She comes to me in the night and nips my ear."

Diane said, "Don't be a fool, Cole. What would Duke think if he drove up and found us in each other's arms? No matter how innocent it was."

"If Duke ever catches us in each other's arms, I should hope it wasn't innocent. I'd hate to be shot for having the name without the game. You'll have to forgive me, Diane." His voice slurred. "Sometimes it's damned lonely."

"But you have Ginny," she said helplessly.

He shrugged. "Ginny's like a sister. There was never anything between us."

"Wasn't there ever . . . anyone, Cole? Anyone you loved?"

"Yes," he said, "there was." And got up and walked away from her. Outside thunder grumbled, died away.

She waited, wordless, hoping he'd tell her about it, pour it all out. He might have spoken but just at that moment the phone rang. It was Duke, sounding tired, saying he'd be home in half an hour and did her dinner go well?

"Cole made a handsome substitute for you." She turned from the instrument to smile at Cole. "Hurry home." She hung up.

Cole rose. "The 'handsome substitute' will just toddle along before the real thing gets here."

"Cole," she protested laughing, "you know I didn't mean it that way!"

"Nice dinner, Diane." But she detected a little hurt look in the smile he gave her. He paused at the door. "I could stay," he volunteered, taking her forearm lightly in his fingers. "Wife sitting is my specialty, you know."

She hesitated. It was a tempting offer. Queenscourt alone at night . . . with thunder rumbling and lightning flashing white through the trees.

His grip tightened on her arm. "God, you get through to a fellow, don't you?" His voice slurred.

She pulled away. "Don't!" she said sharply.

"That's right," he said. "Mustn't touch." And let her go. "But if I stay I might be tempted again. Better off to rattle around in my empty house."

While I rattle around in mine, she thought grimly.

"Take care, Diane." He was off. She watched as a flash of lightning outlined his retreating form and then slowly closed and locked the front doors. She realized suddenly that not a door of Queenscourt creaked. They all moved in well-oiled perfection. Cobbie, obviously, had done more than just "look in" on the place; he had brought along an oil can. And perhaps a screwdriver to adjust slipping hinges, a hammer to drive nails.

She couldn't remember whether that entry "Cobbie" in Lorna's appointment book had been early or more recent. Suddenly she wanted to know, went to the library, flicked on the wall brackets that brought the polished walnut paneling into a rich glow and struck light from the intricate brass and tortoiseshell inlay of the ornate French buhl desk. She rummaged through the top drawer.

The book with its telltale names was gone.

A breeze blew through the open window behind her. She had forgotten that window was open. It had been oppressively hot at dinner, the heat that precedes a storm, and Ben had obligingly opened several of the first floor windows. Now the wind had come up and a cool breeze ruffled the drapes so that they moved ripplingly like a woman's skirt. In the sudden draft the library door slammed.

She hurried over to the window. Outside the lawn darkened as clouds scudded across the moon. She pulled the casement shut and turned the latch, then went over to the double library doors and turned the ornate brass knob. It turned in her hand but the heavy door did not budge. Those doors had always stood open, but there was a keyhole and now she remembered seeing a rather large key in that keyhole. There was no key there now.

She stepped back and looked at the heavy Chinese rug. A key would fall soundlessly to that rug.

But there was no key on the rug, nor at the edge where her foot might inadvertently have kicked it.

Was it possible the key was on the other side and the door in slamming had somehow locked itself? Puzzled, she bent down and peered into the keyhole. She could see right through it into the hall.

Her heart began to pound violently. She took an involuntary step backward, telling herself when the door slammed the key had fallen out on the hall side. Of course, no one had locked her in. Her hands twisted together. *Oh, Duke, please hurry.*

Abruptly all the lights went out and she was standing in darkness. She flinched as a brilliant shaft of forked lightning knifed through the night sky, flooding the room with sudden blue ominous light, to be followed by an immediate loud clap of thunder that died growling.

And then she heard it. A woman's heels tap-tapping down the stairs. A distant sound. Coming from the uncarpeted attic stairs? Diane's breath caught chokingly in her throat. There was a short pause, allowing time for the footsteps to cross soundlessly the carpeted hallway above, and then they started again, coming down the wide uncarpeted main staircase toward her.

And the sound of a body falling.

Chapter 19

Diane shrieked and ran to the other side of the dark room, stumbling over a chair and sprawling full length over a coffee table. She scrambled to her feet, crying convulsively, and plunged at the window, tore at the latch on the casement. Under her assault the latch gave way and she plummeted out onto the dark lawn. As if on signal the storm broke and the rain began, a hard thumping summer rain with a hint of hail in it. It battered and flailed; her voice was lost in it.

She had three choices: She could stay where she was and wait for It, *the thing in the hall*, to find her. Or she could run past the pool—*Lorna's pool*—and make her way to Westwind. Or she could run down the drive and up Trowbridge Road toward the spot where Duke's car would be approaching.

She chose the latter and ran fleetly down the drive, slipping on the wet gravel, plunged through the gates onto Trowbridge Road. In the whipping wind a small branch from one of the trees that overhung the road broke off and fell almost on her head with its mass of wet leaves.

She cried out, skidding on the shiny black asphalt, ran through drenching rain down the center of the road toward the turn, pushing back futilely her soaked hair that whipped in long wet ropes across her face, obscuring her vision. Her dress was plastered to her and as she ran one shoe came off. Ignoring the shoe, she raced toward the dim beam of headlights just rounding the turn through sheets of rain.

In a moment those headlights outlined her frantic running form and the car slid to a halt in the road, the door on the driver's side opened and a man spilled out. Duke.

She fell into his arms, shaking, wet, unable to speak.

"For God's sake, Diane, what's the matter?" he shook her. "Come on, get in, you're soaked."

He pushed her into the car and she collapsed against the seat. His face was grim. Looking at him she realized that no matter what was back there at Queenscourt, if she said she'd heard Lorna's footsteps on the stairs, that Lorna had locked her in the library and then gone back up to relive the scene of her death . . . that would buy her a ticket back to Virginia.

"Do you want to tell me about it?" he said, more gently.

"Someone's broken into Queenscourt," she said, pushing back her wet hair, her breath coming in uneven gasps. "Cole left right after you phoned, and I went into the library. And suddenly the door slammed shut and locked me in, and then the lights went out and I could hear someone walking and a sort of—of thump on the stairs like somebody fell. I panicked and ran."

"Why didn't you say so?" he muttered, and the car shot down the road, skidded on the asphalt as he made the turn into the drive at Queenscourt.

She sat beside him with her head buried in her hands, as he brought the car to a halt.

"Did you say the lights were out?" he asked in a puzzled voice, and Diane lifted her head and looked up at the house.

All the lights were on. Including the library lights.

"But—they were off," she faltered. "I was locked in the dark library and I opened the window and ran out onto the drive. I thought someone had thrown the main switch. Look, you can see the library window standing open."

"I can see that," he said grimly. "Stay here, Diane. I'll deal with our prowler."

"Be careful," she said, hopelessly, for now she didn't think he would find anything. She thought that whatever had slammed the library door and locked it, whatever had walked down from the attic and fallen downstairs, had turned and walked with elegant grace back up to the attic. And gone into the big closets there. To return later. When Diane was again alone.

She pressed her hands against her forehead. Lorna was winning, she was making Diane seem a frightened fool to her husband.

Duke was gone a long time. She could follow his progress as lights went on all over the house. It looked big as a palace. A Midwest palace.

Finally Duke came out and got her. He was silent as he marched her inside, to stand before the library door.

"Go in," he said pleasantly.

She walked uneasily into its lighted interior.

"The door was unlocked, but closed," he said. "Look, Diane."

The key lay on the carpeting outside.

"That's where I found it," he said. "Are you sure the lights didn't flicker in the storm, and you panicked and turned the knob the wrong way?"

She felt sick. "Perhaps . . . that's what happened," she said faintly.

"Diane, where were you going when I picked you up?"

She stared at him, her eyes widening. *He thinks I was going to run out onto the superhighway to my death—like Cornelia.*

"I knew you'd be coming down that road," she said. "I was heading straight for you."

He sighed. "I couldn't find any sign of a break-in. Well, I'll call Cole and see if he saw anyone. Maybe he passed a car on the way home." He picked up the library phone.

"He didn't have his car," said Diane. "He walked over."

"He still might have seen something," said Duke irritably, and dialed. "Cole? Hope I didn't wake you up. Diane thought somebody got into the house after you left, she heard something. Did you see anyone on the way home? A car, anything like that? No? Well, thanks anyway. It's a big house, lots of creaks and squeaks, and as you say the wind had come up. Might have been a branch blowing against the house."

He turned to Diane. "Cole says he didn't see anything, he got caught out in the rain, so he might have overlooked something as he ran for cover." He drummed his knuckles on the table. "I wish we hadn't opened this damned house," he said irritably. "But now that we have—"

Now that we have, you want me to play the game out. Making no uproar. She got the message.

"We missed you at dinner," she said stiffly. "I saved you a drumstick if you're hungry."

He gave her a swift appraising look and she knew he was wondering if she had invented this story to get his attention. She got up, her lips trembling. "I'm tired and soaked and since you say there isn't any burglar in the house—"

"None that I could find," he said surprisingly. "You know, we've had lots of servants. They came and went. Not all of them liked us." She thought stabbingly of the Extension. "But they all knew the layout of the house. They'd know how to crawl in a window if it wasn't locked and then close it and run out of a door that snap-locked behind them."

She saw what he meant. Someone *could* have been in the house and left no evidence.

"Why would anyone do that?" she said warily.

"Theft, probably," he said. "And if they were smart enough not to take anything obvious, to pick up little things that wouldn't be noticed, we might not find anything missing for a long time."

"You mean," she said carefully, "someone not very greedy, who stole a little at a time?"

"Could be." He drummed his fingers. "You're soaked. Better take a hot bath and get to bed."

She was in bed with the light on when Duke came to the door in his light silk bathrobe, stood there tall and formidable and looking so tired it made her heart break for him.

"I'm going to leave you the car from now on and use Cobbie's," he said, as if he had come to some kind of decision. "When the house scares you, just cruise up and down the road until I get back. And sleep with the light on."

She nodded, her humiliation complete.

The next morning Duke was uncommunicative at breakfast, engrossed in reading a newspaper article Cobbie had given him about organized crime taking over legitimate corporations. Cobbie came out to pick him up, with a warm smile for Diane, and after they left she let the breakfast dishes go and went over to the Country Club, lounged around the pool for an hour in her white swimsuit. The people she knew weren't here at this time of day: the men were at their offices, the women sleeping or shopping or chatting over coffee. But the young were out in force and lying on her face with the sun warming her back she listened to talk of rock bands and college credits and how tough it was these days to get a job and the environment. The consensus was that if it weren't for Duke, the pollution around here would be a lot worse. Diane felt pride in him. Her flagging spirits rose a little and she got up and started back toward Queenscourt.

On the way back she saw Nora Allerton, looking outraged,

and gave her a lift. Nora complained that Uncle Trench had gotten away from her and charged through the house on his wheelchair, overturning a small table piled with glassware.

"I hope he's not hurt," said Diane.

"Not him!" Nora's face was red with anger. "But all that lovely glassware!" she moaned. She was still muttering when Diane let her out at Westwind.

Diane went back and washed her breakfast dishes, ran the vacuum cleaner until her back ached and then began scrubbing bathrooms. Grimly she contemplated her private bath. It had seemed so luxurious on first sight—that sunken white marble tub and enormous sink with ornate gold fixtures, one wall mirrored with delicate gold veining, reflecting the gleaming white marble floor. Somehow it lost part of its charm when you were down on your hands and knees scrubbing that vast expanse.

When she straightened up from that, there was Duke's private bath to be done, which was a duplicate of her own—only in black marble. And then the first floor powder room—a pink marble wonder with fancy silver foil walls.

She worked furiously, cleaning and polishing the house, as if she could scrub off Lorna's cloying touch, and in the afternoon she had just straightened up with a sigh from dusting a cloisonné vase atop one of the amber colored French fruitwood tables when she looked out the window and saw a vintage Rolls Royce with a liveried chauffeur pull into the drive. And recognized the erect silver-haired dowager sitting imperiously in the back seat as Emmeline Franklyn, to whom both Ginny and Hilde deferred.

Just like something out of the nineteen-twenties, she thought amused, studying the shiny black car with the fancy silver winged victory poised on its nose. And then ruefully, *Well, Hilde said she'd be calling, and here she is, right on schedule.*

With a sigh she pushed her gingham apron underneath the rose damask cushion of a loveseat in the hall, hoped Emmeline wouldn't be able to tell she'd been polishing the silver earlier, tossed back her hair and marched defiantly forward at the first peal of the door chimes.

Just as Hilde had predicted, Emmeline's chauffeur Barnaby, a tall dignified man with hair as gray as his employer's, doffed his hat politely and boomed in a surprisingly

stentorian baritone that Mrs. Latham Franklyn was outside—and was she receiving?

Diane kept a straight face and said she was indeed receiving, and watched bemused as Barnaby returned to report that fact, opened the car's rear door with a flourish and Mrs. Latham Franklyn herself emerged from the Rolls, set her silver-headed cane firmly upon the gravel and made a stately approach to the house.

Diane couldn't help admiring Emmeline. She walked as if she'd swallowed a broom. Her handsome black sheer dress was relieved only by a single strand of matched pearls and her hair was an artful silver coronet above an imperious face whose fine bone structure was dominated by cold green watchful eyes. Even her cane seemed like a sceptre. When God invented royalty, Diane thought, He had Emmeline Franklyn in mind. . . .

"Mrs. Tarrant?" murmured this replica of a Queen Mother, "I am Emmeline Franklyn."

Meeting that cold green gaze Diane wished fervently she had on something other than a blue cotton housedress and hoped there wasn't a smudge on her nose. "Do come in," she said hospitably. "I was just wishing someone would drop by."

"Indeed?" Mrs. Franklyn looked surprised, as if a desire for human companionship constituted a bizarre behavior pattern. As they entered the hall she paused and her eyes rested briefly on the newel post.

Diane led her formidable guest to the living room, poured sherry from a crystal decanter, agreed that Ohio was beautiful this time of year, she *loved* it.

"And do you love Queenscourt?" Mrs. Franklyn's gaze was cool as she accepted a glass of sherry.

Diane caught her breath. "It's a beautiful old place," she said carefully.

Emmeline sipped her sherry reflectively. "Tell me, do you believe the stories you have undoubtedly been told about this house?"

Diane took a deep breath and said "No."

"Neither do I," said Emmeline Franklyn briskly. "But . . . don't you feel cut off here on Trowbridge Road? I did."

"Sometimes," admitted Diane. "but I think it's the awesome size of this place that makes me feel that way."

"Well, it takes a number of servants to run a house this

large. You do have servants, don't you?" Emmeline peered about as if looking for a bevy of parlour maids.

"Not—yet."

Her guest looked startled. "You've taken all this on yourself—alone?" She looked around her as if calculating the square footage, and checking for dust. "How remarkable. . . . Where are you from?" she pursued, as if that might explain the aberration.

"Virginia," said Diane promptly. "I understand you're from the South?"

"Alabama. But it's so long ago I've forgotten I was ever a Southern belle." She set down her glass, rejected Diane's offer of more sherry, and came to the point. It seemed she was collecting clothing for the Forward Looking House, a home for unmarried mothers, most of them young, teenagers really. Did Diane have anything to contribute? Realizing Emmeline probably knew about Lorna's squirrely ways, Diane said there were some things in the attic. That would do nicely, Emmeline told her. Someone would pick them up on Saturday. And what part of Virginia was Diane from?

"The Piedmont country," smiled Diane. "Do you know it?"

"I know Roanoke," said Mrs. Franklyn. "Lovely country. So green and unspoiled."

"Have you been there recently?"

"Not for almost thirty years, and if it's changed, kindly don't tell me."

Diane closed her mouth, and her forceful guest said she must be going. She went out leaning on her silver-headed cane and in the hall her eyes fell on the newel post again. There was a kind of horror in them. She left rapidly and the dignified gray-haired chauffeur leaped forward and gravely handed her into the car, as if she were made of rare and fragile glass.

Diane had just pulled her gingham apron out from under the damask cushion when the phone rang and Ginny's light voice said, "I was just coming back from Hilde's when I saw Emmeline Franklyn's car drive away. What did you think of her?"

"Hilde warned me it would be an experience!"

"I suppose she's after you for the Garden Club?"

"No."

"Oh?" Ginny sounded surprised.

"She wanted teenage clothes for the Forward Looking House."

"The what? Oh, that unmarried mothers place . . . it's her thing now. It used to be orphans. She'd come calling on Lorna and me, and we'd sit and fidget." Ginny's tone disposed of "do-gooders." "Well, you're slim, Diane, but you're not a teenager."

"I thought I'd give her some of Lorna's teenage things. Want to come over and help me select them? You know better than I what she'd want."

"Well—all right," said Ginny after a moment's hesitation. "See you in a few minutes." Diane thought guiltily that Ginny probably guessed how she felt about the attic and was coming over to bolster Diane's courage to go up there.

She found a pair of grass shears and, to kill time as she waited for Ginny, walked out into the side yard toward Westwind, snipping idly at clumps of grass where Jeff had been afraid to bring the lawnmower too near the shrubs—and saw, through the break in the hedge, Uncle Trench waving furiously at her from his wheelchair.

"Saw Emmeline Franklyn over at your place, little Missy," he crowed as she approached. "Can't say I haven't got good eyesight! Knew who it was right away!"

Diane forebore saying that Emmeline's ancient Rolls Royce was perhaps the most conspicuous car in the neighborhood.

"Bet she gave you a hard time," he said slyly. "She's a hell-bender, that woman. Best time Latham and I ever had was when she left him."

Diane looked surprised. "She left him? But I thought—"

"Oh, she said she was going to Alabama to see her folks, but once she got there, she went on to visit someone else. The letters came in regular, but *she* didn't. I hoped she wouldn't come back at all. She hated me so, used to call me Lucifer's shadow." He cackled. "Latham and me helled around all the time she was gone. That was the best year I ever had on Trowbridge Road, the year she was away."

"When was that, Uncle Trench?" she asked idly.

His brows puckered. "When? Oh, that was a long time ago." His face brightened. "It was the year Ginny was born," he said. "Out in Tucson. Her folks lived there then. My brother was in oil. Ginny's mother died in childbirth, and five years later my brother went out to Indonesia and part of an

oil rig fell on him, killed him. So I got Ginny before she was six. I brought her up. Think I did a good job, little Missy?"

"A very good job, Uncle Trench," smiled Diane. "And here she comes now," she added, looking up to see Ginny emerge from the side door, looking almost paper thin in a sleeveless off-white nubby silk with a necklace of tumbled chunks of fine green and white jade. Her silver blonde hair was faultless and so was her makeup.

"Ginny, I feel frumpy beside you," Diane exclaimed. "How do you do it? On a hot day like this?"

"Lots of air conditioning and cool lemonade," laughed Ginny. "You should try it."

"I will right now, if you'll join me in a glass," said Diane, leading Ginny across the lawn and into the breakfast room. "There's some in the refrigerator."

"Wonderful," said Ginny, sitting down. "That trek across the hot lawn got to me. Nothing like a Midwest summer."

Diane poured the lemonade into tall silver-rimmed glasses and asked abruptly, "Ginny, were Garnet and Marnie *both* mad? Uncle Trench says so."

"Garnet wasn't mad," said Ginny promptly. "Just mean. Uncle Trench hated Marnie because she threw something at him one day. But he hated Garnet because she distributed her favors so lavishly—on everyone but him, if you know what I mean." She laughed. "I think he felt left out."

"Was Latham Franklyn one of her admirers?" asked Diane suddenly.

"No," said Ginny. "Garnet stayed clear of him. Didn't want to get herself beaten up. He'd courted Marnie in early days, but lost out to Ronald MacQueen. Everyone around here was onto Latham's nasty ways. He had to import his women from the surrounding towns. It's said he paid off a packet to various ones because of what he did to them. Personally I wouldn't have gone near The Elms after dark in those days. I'd have expected Latham to jump out of the bushes at me—not that he did that sort of thing, of course, it was just the feeling I had about him.

"I don't see how Emmeline Franklyn stayed with him."

"Emmeline," said Ginny frankly, "was lured by all that money. And once she had it, she couldn't bear to let it go."

"But didn't he beat her up?"

"Only once," said Ginny. "And that was the talk of the

town for a while. They were both in the hospital. In separate wings. She looked *awful*. He'd blacked both her eyes and broken her jaw and she'd gone after him with a poker and almost killed him—they had him in traction. Old Dr. Spicer told his wife about it and *she* thought it was too good to keep and told Kitty and it went the rounds. Anyway after that Latham kept a wary eye out for Emmeline and she moved into apartments of her own on the third floor and went into them right after dinner and kept the doors locked. That's when she hired Barnaby. He wasn't her chauffeur then—she drove her own car. Called Barnaby a "house man." More like a body-guard! He lived in. Some people say he slept outside Emmeline's door like a dog. I never knew the truth of that. None of the other servants lived in at The Elms, so although they said that, none of them were ever there to have actually seen it."

"The third floor? Wasn't that awfully hard for her with her arthritis?"

"Oh, she didn't have it then. It came on after she broke her ankle—the same day Latham had his stroke. Gossip says she broke it fleeing from him and he had his stroke when she eluded him and Barnaby leaped between them. So Latham was flat on his back with his stroke, and Emmeline hobbling along with her arthritis, and she moved him—how he must have hated that!—right into town, and he died there. Not in a hospital but under her tender loving care." Ginny shivered. "But I guess he had it coming to him after all the bad things he'd done."

Well, thought Diane grimly, *"I wanted to know about these people. And I am learning!"*

"Diane," said Ginny, setting down her tinkling glass. "You look tired. You ought to get out of this Midwest heat, lie around on some beach or go to the mountains. Duke can get along all right, he always has."

"No," laughed Diane. "Like—Grant, wasn't it? I'm going to fight it out along these lines if it takes all summer."

"In that case," said Ginny, rising, "on to the attic!"

"You'll know better than I what clothes Emmeline wants," said Diane, rising too. "After all, she was your neighbor for a long time. You must have known her well."

"Too well!" laughed Ginny. "We were Emmeline's despair, Lorna and I. She'd sent her own son away because she couldn't bear for him to be under Latham's influence, so she

turned her attention to other unlucky children—and we were conveniently close. She'd come calling on me and bring me little gifts and gobs of advice, and she went calling on Lorna too until Garnet MacQueen made it clear she wasn't welcome, that she didn't consider Lorna an orphan any more since she now had a stepmother—her." Ginny hooted. "There wasn't a motherly bone in Garnet's body."

"What was Garnet like?" asked Diane, as they started up the stairs.

"She was what you'd imagine a woman lion tamer to be," said Ginny grimly. "Able to face down lions with a willow wand. Garnet didn't like me and I couldn't have cared less. Personally I thought Ronald MacQueen was out of his mind to marry her. He'd married the mad sister of the family—why follow up that blunder by marrying the mean one?"

Why indeed? wondered Diane. Unless the sisters had had some strange overpowering attraction for him.

"Of course, everybody understood his marrying Marnie," said Ginny. "She was one of those willowy flowerlike brunettes with big soulful eyes. There used to be a lovely portrait of her in the house until Lorna got rid of it."

She burned them in the fireplace one nippy October evening, thought Diane, remembering Cole's words. Mad Marnie and mean Garnet . . . how hellish life must have seemed to the young Lorna. And was she now taking her revenge unselectively on any woman who dared invade Queenscourt?

"I remember Emmeline's face went white the day Garnet ordered her out of the house," said Ginny. "I'd just come through the front door and Emmeline almost knocked me down as she left. We collided in the entrance and I heard her gasp—" She turned to Diane with a laugh. "Well, I didn't know Emmeline knew words like that! But without her 'orphans' she promptly found a new interest—unmarried mothers. Poor things, I pity them being in Emmeline's grasp." Her face grew sober. "Everything changed that year—for all of us. That summer Latham Franklyn had his stroke, Cole's mother died of scarlet fever and for a while we were all quarantined, Garnet MacQueen got run over and Ronald MacQueen committed suicide. And that fall Lorna went away to school in California, and I went away to school in New Orleans. And when I came back for Christmas vacation Uncle Trench was sick and needed me, and Lorna had quit

school and decided to live at Queenscourt and throw the biggest parties in the County, Emmeline had had her first bout with arthritis and had fired all her servants but Barnaby and sold The Elms to Hilde and Ben and moved into town and immersed herself in the Forward-Looking House—for which we are now collecting clothes!" she added dramatically as Diane flung open the attic door. "I will *never*," murmured Ginny, "like this great echoing place. I can't understand why Lorna didn't install some decent lighting for her collection."

"Maybe," said Diane grimly, "she knew every item so well she could see them in the dark."

"That's possible," said Ginny, moving forward into a gloom hardly penetrated by the weak bulbs in the ceiling, and together they trudged down past rows of doors that stretched from Lorna-at-her-death toward that baby Lorna who had had the usual teething rings and rattles.

"Not too far," cautioned Ginny. "You'll be getting into the kiddie stuff. This should be about right."

She flung open a door and muttered, "No, too young," opened another. "There," she said.

Here were the cherished dungarees, the brightly colored party dresses, the shirts and shorts and bulky sweaters dear to young hearts.

"I'll get a box," said Diane, and walked down to where she had knocked boxes helter skelter packing Lorna's shoes to go out in the trash. She reached down to pick up the nearest one, and as she did so a breeze came up the stairs and banged the attic door shut, and either that same breeze or the vibration from the banging door must have caused one of the closet doors, insecurely fastened, to swing open.

Diane straightened up. This was the "newest" closet, where the beautiful clothes Lorna had been wearing at the time of her death were stored. And saw below them, lined up like little soldiers, all the shoes she had stuffed into a box that had presumably been hauled away by the trash men.

The shoes were back.

Chapter 20

Diane reeled on her feet. They *couldn't* be back! Her hand pressed over her mouth to muffle the scream that rose in her throat.

"Did you say something?" called Ginny from a couple of room lengths away.

Diane backed away from the open closet door and restrained herself from running back to Ginny's side. *Lorna was mocking her, demonstrating her power. . . .* She got control of her voice. "It's nothing. I thought I saw a spider."

"Ugh, let's finish!" Hastily Ginny began pulling clothes off hangers, handing them to Diane to stuff into the big box. "Lots of this stuff Emmeline wouldn't want." She riffled through the racks. "Midriff dresses, bikinis, no—here, she'll love these sweaters and skirts; they look as if they've never been worn." She pulled out a gray riding habit on a pink satin hanger. "This was Lorna's favorite of all. She was nearly your size when she wore it—how she loved this. . . . And here's the gray silk shirt she wore with it and the black riding boots! Honestly! Lorna certainly kept everything."

Diane stared at the beautifully tailored riding clothes. She had a violent urge to be rid of them. "Toss them on the pile," she said. "And that's all we can carry."

Together they got the box downstairs into the front hall, and Diane urged Ginny to stay for dinner.

"Sorry, I'm booked for dinner with Kitty and Todd." Ginny looked askance at Diane. "Aren't you having dinner with Frieda at the Club tonight?"

"I'd *forgotten!*" gasped Diane. "Thanks for reminding me!"

"Oh, I'm great at all the unimportant things," sighed Ginny. "I just miss on the important ones. . . ." It was the only time she'd ever seen Ginny's perfect facade crack even a little, but it was only for an instant. "Get an appointment

book," advised Ginny crisply. "Lorna couldn't have managed without one."

With Ginny gone, Diane ran to call Duke at Cobbie's.

"What's wrong?" he demanded. "You sound upset."

She didn't dare tell him about the shoes. "I forgot to mention we're having dinner with Frieda and Archer Payne."

He was silent for a moment. "Make some excuse. Get out of it."

"Duke, I *can't*! Frieda helped write all those invitations!"

"Don't accept too many favors," he said. "Rule of the road."

"Why not?" she asked bluntly.

"Case in point: If I go, Archer's sure to pressure me for the job of Vice President in Charge of Production he's bucking so hard for—unlike President and Vice President of Tarrant Steel, which the stockholders vote for—V.P. Production is appointed by the President. Archer wants it, and I can't afford to make any commitments right now with things as shaky as they are."

Diane frowned. "Duke, are you telling me Archer isn't first team? That he's on his way up, but still second-string?"

Duke sighed. "Archer's a good man, Diane. Solid and steady. But he's not a big stockholder. And this is a proxy fight. I may have to dicker away that vice presidency for the time being. Archer will get it eventually; he deserves it, but I can't promise it to him as of next month. Which is what he wants. Look, I don't want to alienate Archer, I just want to stall him. You go on to dinner, tell them something came up and I couldn't make it."

Another dinner without him. Her heart sagged. "All right."

"Well, don't sound so tragic," he said. "You'll have pleasant company and a good dinner at the Club. Call before you leave the Club to be sure I'm home. I don't want you home at night alone."

Gloomily, she hung up and half-heartedly began cleaning again, but she couldn't concentrate on it. Shoes, beautiful shoes, kept marching through her mind.

When it was time to dress for dinner, she forced her reluctant feet up the stairs, changed to a cool ice green caftan, put on her chunky diamond, and marched back down the hall. She had reached the stairs when somewhere in the distance a shutter banged. Or was it a door?

She paused, holding her breath to listen. Silence gathered around her. The gloom of the long hall seemed to intensify. For a moment there was a humming in her head as of bees, and the air seemed stagnant, thick. Looking up, she saw the steps rising above her, to disappear into gloom toward the attic door . . . where Lorna's clothes held sway, where Lorna's shoes roamed at will.

She had a terrible feeling that if she stood there a few moments longer Lorna herself, completely assembled, would lean over the railing above and smile down at her with a flash of white teeth.

The shutter banged again. Diane fled in panic down the stairs, bursting through the front doors to stand panting on the drive. She looked around her guiltily, hoping no one had seen her abrupt exit. But the windows of Westwind were blank, no cars moved on the road, the wind had for the moment stilled. She was alone in the yard in the lazy summer air.

It occurred to her that as a sensible householder she really ought to walk around the building and see which shutter was banging. Observing nothing from the front or the pool side, she was walking the length of the shallow back yard when she heard a sound from the empty stable half hidden by shrubbery and trees. Perhaps some animal had gotten trapped in there. She'd just open the door and leave it ajar so it could make its escape.

With that in mind, she walked through the paddock and pushed open a creaking door. At the far end sunshine poured into the cool dark interior through an open wooden shutter. Could that have been what she'd heard banging? She walked across the cool breadth of the stable, closed and latched the shutter, and then realized it was quite dark in here.

She had a sudden sharp feeling that eyes were watching her out of that darkness and hurried toward the door when abruptly it banged shut. She took a deep breath and, forcing herself to keep calm, advanced on the door. As she reached it, it was yanked open and silhouetted against the light was a tall figure. Dark and stooped. Sinister.

Diane stifled a scream and fell back—only to realize that it was Jeff standing there. He looked almost as startled as she did.

"I didn't know you was in here, Mrs. Tarrant," he said apologetically. "I saw some of them boys from the Extension prowling around the back yard and followed them over here,

thought they might be up to some mischief. When I heard the door slam I thought they might be hiding in here. Afraid I scared you."

"You did," admitted Diane, walking out and leaning weakly against the fence. "I'm glad it was you!"

"Guess they got away," he said regretfully. "I'll look around some more." With a nod he was off, and Diane walked around to the front of the house soberly. So one of the boys from the Extension had sneaked up and slammed the stable door shut on her. Of course, she could have climbed out of a window even if the door was locked but . . . she felt uneasy, surrounded by ill will.

With a last look at Queenscourt's inscrutable face, she got into the car and headed for the Club.

She found the Club agog when she got there. It seemed that someone named Scottie Danville (whose face she couldn't for the life of her remember) was suing her husband of thirty years for a divorce and naming not one but *three* members as co-respondents—all married women, so the gossip went. Since there were no less than twelve likely candidates for the honor, speculation was rife as to which ladies would be chosen.

She pushed her way through the crowd, found Frieda and Archer looking like fat cherubs in the dimly lit bar sipping martinis and obviously waiting for her. Frieda showed only a little pain when Diane explained Duke couldn't come, and Archer, whose bland placid face never showed anything anyway, said better luck next time. Diane refused a drink and they went in to dinner.

Which was a complete fiasco.

Over the fruit cup Frieda told her a horrible tale about a recent attempted midnight grave robbing by some MacQueensport boys, which had ended as they ran gibbering into the hands of the law, reporting rocks had been hurled at them by ghostly hands.

Archer hooted at this "women's talk" and turned to discuss the strike with some friends at the next table, but Diane said slowly, "Do you believe the dead can control objects?" She thought of Lorna's shoes, marching back to the attic with single-minded purpose.

Frieda nodded soberly. "I believe an object can become possessed," she said. "Or an area. Or a house." She fixed Di-

ane with her round blue eyes. "The poltergeists—ghosts who move objects—have sometimes been known to kill." She paused. "I read about an Illinois woman who drowned her husband and married her lover. And on the anniversary of her dead husband's death, she got into his vintage car of which he'd been so proud and started the motor—and the garage doors slammed shut and jammed. The key fell out of the ignition and as she tried to get it, it kept edging away, just out of reach—until she passed out. They revived her long enough to gasp out her story and confess to the murder." Frieda smiled. "She said her husband had always liked to do something special on their wedding anniversary."

"Hogwash," said practical Archer, coming back into the conversation. "Her new husband was probably trying to collect her insurance!"

Diane took a quick gulp of water. She wished she hadn't heard that story. Anniversary. . . . They were giving a party on the anniversary of Lorna's death. In Lorna's house. Where Lorna's shoes patrolled.

Across the room with an older couple she saw Ginny, who waved at her. She thought suddenly of Uncle Trench, alone at Westwind with Nora Allerton who "slept like the dead" and servants clustered in a far wing. For all its luxury, Westwind was a lonely place.

So too was Queenscourt, where a hard-pressed Steel Duke and his do-it-yourself Duchess struggled to keep up appearances. And Vair Hall where Coleman Vair drank the days away.

Only at The Elms was there any semblance of normal family life. And that was a reflection of Hilde's warmth and honesty and vitality. Not Ben with his shadowed eyes. She wondered why Ben was so sad. Surely life had been good to him: It had given him a good job, powerful connections, a wife who adored him, two pretty daughters, a handsome home. But there was something dark in his eyes.

Midway through dinner came a call from Frieda's baby sitter. One of the children, it seemed, had gotten hold of some matches and ignited the drapes, but the fire department was there and— Making apologies to Diane, Archer and Frieda charged toward the door. People turned to stare at Diane, left suddenly alone. She felt embarrassed.

From across the room Ginny, who had been watching the

scene narrowly, got up and came over and joined Diane.

"Whatever did you do to Archer?" she demanded, sliding into a chair. "I haven't seen him display this much animation since the night Francie danced her shoes off on the bar."

"There's a fire at their house," explained Diane. "Baby sitter let the children play with matches."

"And people tell me I should have married!" Ginny considered Diane. "You know, you've been a good influence on Duke," she said bluntly. "A softening influence. He was awfully *wild*."

Diane asked abruptly, "Did Francie come to live at Queenscourt after her father died?"

"Her mother and father died about the same time," said Ginny reflectively. "In different places, of course. After which Francie asserted herself and took off for Europe, and Lorna went away to school—briefly—and came back to lord it over Queenscourt. They never got on."

Like the cougar and the jaguar, thought Diane suddenly. Each had its range and if one invaded the other's territory, it was move—or fight. Plainly Lorna had stood ready to defend her territory.

A smile played around Ginny's mouth. "Francie considered Duke *her* beau, you know. Used to claim they were engaged. I always thought that was why Lorna married Duke . . . to spite Francie."

Diane flinched. *How horrible for Duke if that were true.*

"Well, it's all straightened out now. He has you." Did she detect a note of irony in Ginny's tone? Ginny rose. "I must get back. I just came over to see what was wrong. You looked so stricken and Archer and Frieda were positively apoplectic."

Diane rose too. "I must call Duke and tell him I'm coming home."

"You mean you give him *warning*?" mocked Ginny. "You are a thoughtful bride!"

Still smarting from that, Diane found a phone and dialed the Queenscourt number. It rang eight times. As she turned away, she ran into Kitty, who insisted on showing her the newly-redecorated Club ballroom.

They stood together in its empty white and gold expanse.

"I suggested the brocade," said Kitty with pride. "When do you think you'll redecorate Queenscourt?"

"I'm in no hurry," sighed Diane.

"Oh?" Kitty's brows shot up. "Maybe you should be. Frieda says memories cling to *things*. If I thought that, the first room at Queenscourt I'd change would be the dining room."

"Why the dining room especially?"

"Because it was the scene of such rare fights," confided Kitty. "No doubt the battle raged through all the rooms, but mealtime was always a crisis." She laughed. "I used to think Lorna might kill Garnet right there at the dinner table. Oh, it was *very* exciting going there. You never knew what would happen." She leaned forward conspiratorially. "I was there the night *before*, you know."

"The night before what?" asked Diane uncomfortably.

"The night before Garnet was run down in the road," said Kitty patiently. "I had dinner with them. With Garnet actually and Ronald MacQueen. Lorna was late. She was always racing in late. And this particular day she burst in and her face was white with fury. I'll never forget how wild she looked, her green eyes flashing and that black riding habit. She said someone had poisoned her dog, and she *advanced* on Garnet with her riding crop raised—it was clear she was accusing Garnet. And Ronald MacQueen rose from his chair and said '*Lorna*!' in that commanding way. And Garnet sat back in her chair looking amused, and smoothed back her red hair and said, 'Ronald, your daughter must apologize to me. I don't like her manner.' And Ronald looked positively *sick* as Lorna swung on him, shouting she'd never apologize to that woman!"

Diane could see the awful scene, the big dining room with its tall beamed ceiling, the long table with its frosty linens and gleaming silver and ice tinkling in the glasses, the servants hovering fascinated in the background, food growing cold on the sideboard as everybody waited to see what would happen—and Kitty, a younger Kitty but just as scandal-conscious, titillated by the scene, watching bright-eyed and hoping they would all come to blows.

"And did she?" gasped Diane. "Apologize?"

"Lorna?" scoffed Kitty. "Of course not. I never knew Lorna to apologize to anyone in her life. She'd have died first. So Garnet saw Lorna wasn't going to apologize and Ronald MacQueen wasn't going to make her do it, and she leaned over in that *feline* way she had and said, 'You're so

like your mother, Lorna. Remind me to tell you about her . . . youthful experiences.' And Ronald MacQueen rose from his chair and flung down his napkin and I really thought he was going to *attack* Garnet. Garnet laughed and raised her glass in a little mocking toast to him, and Lorna threw her riding crop at the table and knocked over the centerpiece—it was a big crystal and silver affair; flowers and water went all over the table—and stormed out. The atmosphere was positively electric! And the very next day Garnet was run over at that bad turn at the corner of Trowbridge Road." She shrugged. "Lorna must have been delighted!"

Lorna the lucky . . . thought Diane soberly. The devil's favorite asking—and receiving—a little favor from hell.

"I'm surprised they never found out who did it," said Diane.

Kitty gave her a sly smile. "Well, after all, who ever uses that road except the people who live on Trowbridge Road? And if you could have seen Ronald MacQueen's face when he looked at Garnet at dinner the night before . . . well, I thought he might kill her then and there. I was ready to run screaming from the room."

"You think Ronald MacQueen ran over Garnet?"

Kitty shrugged. "It could have happened that way. And he could have been so overcome by remorse—after all, he must have had *some* feeling for Garnet, he married her so soon after his first wife Marnie's death; of course, I always thought they were having an affair long before poor Marnie died—but he could have become conscience-stricken and in a burst of grief and self-rage, pulled the trigger and blown out his brains that night in the trophy room."

"Did you tell the police about it?"

"Oh, I told the police *all* about it," said Kitty, relishing the memory. "How they'd all had this terrible fight and Lorna had flung out of the house, and Ronald MacQueen had sat there brooding like a thundercloud staring at his drink, and how Garnet for all her bravado and her swagger had looked sort of scared . . . I told them everything I knew," she added happily. "But at that point, with all the major participants dead, they simply shoveled them under without much ado."

Which seems to be the usual pattern around here, thought Diane grimly. Life is for the living, the dead get six feet of earth.

"Did you see much of Ginny in those days?" she asked abruptly, thinking Ginny must have had a grandstand seat for these goings on.

"Oh, Ginny was such a colorless little thing, who noticed her?" scoffed Kitty. "Lorna burned like a beacon and the world lit up when Francie came to town, but poor Ginny was just a tiny little candle in the window if you know what I mean. . . ."

"But always there," murmured Diane. "Always there for Uncle Trench, for Lorna, for Cole . . . for those who needed her. Her heart went out to Ginny, the unloved, and after Kitty left her, she walked outside to stand on the long verandah and watch the peaceful vista of the lake. There were a couple of small boats on the lake and the sound of laughter drifted to her through the dusk. She stood there while the dark closed down and the moon came out and called Queenscourt again. Still no answer.

Deciding finally to drive home and park out front and wait for Duke, she went to the parking lot—and the car wouldn't start. She got out indecisively, saw a pair of headlights entering the lot, recognized Cole's car and waved to him.

He ambled over, not too steadily, and checked the gauges.

"You're out of gas," he pronounced. "Tell you what: I'll drive you to a station I know where they'll sell you a gallon in a container—if you have the right kind of container." And to her worried look he laughed and said, "And I have. Right in my trunk. I'm always running out of gas on lonesome roads when I take wrong turns in the night, so I carry the container with me."

"Full?" she asked hopefully.

"Empty. Come along, Diane."

She followed him meekly, got into his car, and they started off. "Where's your wandering boy tonight?" he asked.

"He should be home soon. I called the house but there was no answer."

"Poor little bride." He angled a look at her. "Deserted so soon. Are you interested in local history?" He chuckled as he swung off onto a gravel road. The car lurched through an open wooden gate and into a patch of woods. "Lot of local history's been made here," he said cheerfully, braking. "Favorite spot of my misspent youth." He waved an arm. "Our celebrated lovers' lane."

"Cole!" Diane protested.

"Used to be an old house here, but it burned down," he said, pointing, and as she looked up to see the dark shape of a ruined brick chimney towering dark above the trees, his arm dropped lightly over her shoulders. "Chimney's all that's left of it."

Diane reached up and firmly removed his arm.

Cole sighed. "You're missing the best part of the guided tour!"

"Take—me—to—a—gas—station," said Diane evenly.

"Oh, well, if you put it that way." He backed up, jouncing the car through the trees. "Now about here—" he missed a big sycamore, swung expertly past a clump of beech—"is where all the young fry of MacQueensport used to park. Uh-oh. Seems they're still using it. Let's see who it is!"

Before she could protest he had turned the wheel so that the headlights were riveted on that other car, and Diane saw that it was long and sleek and black and expensive. A man's dark head ducked as the headlights struck full on so that she couldn't see who it was, but the woman's head spun around and looked straight at them. Her eyes were bright, her hair ruffled, she was laughing.

"Well, what do you know?" said Cole. "It's Francie."

He made a jolting U-turn over some tree roots and they bounced through the wooden gate back onto the highway and came to a jarring stop. Diane could see a fender sticking out of some bushes beneath a tree. Cole backed up and studied it. "Well, what do you know?" He whistled as the license number came up in sharp relief in his headlights.

She saw then that it was Cobbie's car, hidden in the bushes.

Her heart was pounding. Cole had seen Cobbie's car from the highway, that was why he had turned in, to see who Duke was trysting with. . . . She felt ashamed and bitter and enraged.

"Diane," he said soberly, "why don't I just take you home and tomorrow I'll put some gas in your car and drive it to your front door?"

She nodded, numb.

He gave her arm a commiserating pat. "Let's try to beat your husband home."

She sat beside him, miserable, and started when he said suddenly, "There's a car following us. I think it's Duke."

She looked back and saw the car, coming up fast and closing the distance. As if herding them in, the other car followed, pacing them. It turned when they turned, swung after them through the wide gates of Queenscourt, came to a halt behind them on the drive.

Duke got out and before Cole could get there, strode over and opened the door for Diane. She got out, feeling very small beside his broad frame that towered over her.

"You've come in a strange direction, if you've come from the Club," he remarked.

"Oh, we came by way of lovers' lane," grinned Cole impudently. "Just showing the bride the sights."

"And did she see them?" asked Duke grimly.

"We saw Francie there. Parked with some fellow." Cole's gaze was challenging.

Diane felt suffocated.

"What have you done with my car?" Duke asked her.

"I ran out of gas," she said faintly. "Cole's going to gas it up tomorrow and bring it home."

"That's damn nice of Cole," said Duke grimly.

"My pleasure," grinned Cole. "See you tomorrow—some-time." He climbed back into his car whistling and drove away. Diane watched him go with bitter regret. He had taken her there deliberately, she knew. To show her something she'd rather not have seen.

Silent, she went into the house, watched Duke irritably pour himself a drink. "Damn Cole's timing," he muttered. "It couldn't be worse." He turned to Diane. "What the devil were you thinking of, going to lovers' lane with him?"

"I could hardly help it, unless I jumped out of the car!" she flared. "What were *you* doing there?"

She had blurted it out. His look of surprise jarred her.

"I was following Francie," he said quietly.

Something inside her twisted and tore. "Why?" she asked between clenched teeth.

"She's been seeing someone. When she goes to the Club, she leaves early. I wanted to know who it was."

"What business is it of yours?" she demanded.

"It may be the reason she won't give me an answer on her proxy or on buying the house. It's not like Francie to pro-

crastinate. She's the kind who hurls her heart over and follows it in. But she's stalling me. Which doesn't make sense, since she always said Queenscourt was the perfect house for her. . . ." He was thinking out loud now, frowning.

Her voice stabbed at him. "I saw only two cars: Yours. And hers."

"If you'd been a little more alert," he said sharply, "you'd have seen three. There was a black car parked back in the trees. I had left Cobbie's car at the road and was easing down toward it on foot when you and Cole made your untimely entrance. Whoever was with Francie jumped out of her car and ran for his. I heard it ripping through the brush but I couldn't get through the bushes fast enough. Didn't even get his license number."

She lifted her chin. "How very unfortunate," she said bitterly, "that you couldn't see who your rival was!"

Duke's eyes glinted. "Let's not have the pot calling the kettle black," he said softly.

"What do you mean?" she cried, coloring.

A sardonic smile played around his mouth. "I mean your constant companion. Cole. You're seen together in cemeteries, supermarkets, bridal paths, lovers' lanes."

"How dare you infer—"

"I'm not inferring. Talk gets to Cobbie. It reaches me."

There were tears of fury in her eyes as she jumped up. "I *hope* you don't think there's anything between Cole and me!"

"No, I don't," he said. "If I did—" his eyes flickered with something that frightened her—"I'd throw you on the next plane for anywhere and be rid of you once and for all. A second wandering wife I don't need." He turned and poured himself another drink. She watched him, shaking with rage. "Must have been a married man with Francie," he muttered. "Only reason I can think of. Francie'd have flaunted him, I'm sure of that. It's her style."

"Well, *my* style is going to bed!" flashed Diane. "Now. I have a headache."

He gave her a look that said sudden headaches didn't impress him, and followed her as she stomped up the stairs.

"Goodnight," said Diane, closing the door firmly in his face. Then she went into the bathroom and turned the shower on full blast. She didn't want him to know she was weeping.

Chapter 21

By morning she had convinced herself that she'd been wrong, dead wrong. Duke had followed Francie for business reasons, that was all. But she was still stung by his saying "Talk gets to Cobbie . . ." At breakfast she asked bluntly, "Duke who's been talking to Cobbie about me?"

He shrugged, studying the newspaper in his hand. "I didn't ask. Word gets around."

She stiffened. "Have you been checking up on me?"

"God forbid, Diane," he said, putting down the paper. "Or that I'd need to. I was just pointing out that in every marriage there has to be an element of trust."

Diane bit her lip, began going through the mail. "All these requests for money," she grumbled. "I never knew there were so many good causes—it would be easier to tell them we're not solvent."

"They wouldn't believe it," he said, finishing his coffee. "They'd look at this pile of a house and know you for a liar."

"At least," she sighed, "Emmeline Franklyn only wanted old clothes."

"What?" he said in astonishment. "Emmeline Franklyn is one of the wealthiest women in the state. Garson Smelters has her proxy year after year—he's from her hometown in Alabama, childhood friends—and I can tell you it makes a difference the way that bloc votes. She can't want *old clothes*."

"They're for that unmarried mothers' place."

His face cleared. "That's better. If Emmeline Franklyn is out begging for old clothes for herself, the economy's shot to hell."

Diane took a deep breath. "Cole found a sign pinned to the gate. It said 'MURDERER.'"

"Did it now?" His face was grim. "And why didn't you tell me this before?"

"Well, I—didn't want to worry you."

"I would like to be *informed*, Diane. Let me decide whether to worry or not."

Smarting under his tone, she jumped up and cleared the dishes, joined him in the living room.

"I'm waiting for a phone call," he said. "When I get it, I'll be off. Want to ride into town with me?"

"No," she said crisply. "I'm going to exercise Topaz. Hilde said I could ride her anytime I wanted to."

"I'll buy her for you when we get some money," said Duke absently. He went over to the TV. "What's the matter with the set?"

"Oh, that isn't working," said Diane hastily.

"Well, call a repairman," he said irritably. "Have it fixed."

Diane bit her lip. More expense. . . .

She marched upstairs angrily, and climbed into Ginny's beautiful golden tan riding habit, heard the phone ring. That must be Duke's call. She tied her hair back and ran downstairs, caught Duke just going out the door.

"I haven't seen that outfit before," he said.

"It's Ginny's," said Diane with a toss of her head.

His brows drew together. "Hasn't your own habit arrived?"

She faced him squarely. "I didn't order one," she said in a clear voice, "for the same reason I didn't get the TV set fixed. We haven't the money."

"They'll bill us," he explained patiently. "There's nothing wrong with my credit."

"Duke, we haven't *got* the money. And maybe we won't get it."

"Let me worry about that. In the meantime, I can't have you sponging on the neighbors, using their servants, wearing their clothes. I told you to get your own riding clothes."

"Cole," said Diane bitterly, "thought I looked lovely in this one."

Duke's eyes were narrowed and for a moment Diane was afraid of him. She braced herself.

Abruptly, as if thinking better of it, he turned to the door.

"What's upsetting you?" she cried. "Surely it can't be anything so small as—as what I wear!"

He turned to her, brows furrowing. "Hasn't anybody told

you? There's going to be a strike. Unless I can prevent it. And a strike could thin out my chances considerably."

A strike. . . .

Suddenly it was too much, *too much*. Strikes, no money, gadgets that didn't work, keeping up a front, Francie Pelton. Her fists clenched.

"I'll take off my borrowed finery!" she shouted. "I'll give these clothes back to Ginny!"

"Lower your voice," said Duke between his teeth. "Do you want the neighbors to hear you?"

With an angry sob she turned and ran up the stairs. She heard the door slam. He was gone.

She threw herself on the bed, crying. Then she jumped up and began tearing off Ginny's riding habit. She wanted to get out of this house, *out of this house!* A good ride on Topaz, that was what she needed to calm her down, make her think straight.

Why, there was a riding habit downstairs, she realized, that old one she had piled on top of the box of things to give to Emmeline Franklyn's charity. There were even boots and a blouse to go with it!

She ran downstairs in her underwear, dashing the tears from her eyes, secure in the knowledge that no one could see her in the dark windowless hall, and dressed hastily. It was a hard struggle, for the clothes weren't quite large enough, but in the cool cavernous hall she managed to get into them, pulled on the boots, grabbed her house keys and marched down the road to Hilde's, her eyes snapping. As she passed Westwind, Ginny, just pulling into her driveway, leaned out of her Mercedes and waved. Diane waved back and kept on going. As she passed the ivy covered brick gateposts of Vair Hall, she saw Cole's car was parked almost crosswise in the driveway—symbol of the state he'd been in when he got home last night.

At The Elms, she was about to use the heavy iron knocker when the door opened and Ben Harris, dressed in a business suit, came out.

"Hello, Diane," he said. "Hilde isn't here. I've an appointment—"

"She told me I could exercise Topaz. Thought I'd ride her down to the Extension."

"Good idea. Lenny will saddle her for you. Clayton," he

called over his shoulder, "bring Mrs. Tarrant some iced tea." He jumped into his car and drove away, and Clayton showed Diane to the sunroom where she sat down on a flowered chintz chair and sipped the iced tea he brought her.

While she was drinking her second glass of iced tea, Lover Boy, his paw bandaged, ambled in and she stroked his head absently. He sniffed at her riding habit and backed away, as if he scented an enemy. Growling softly, he left the room.

She watched him go in surprise. He'd always been so friendly. She remembered abruptly whose habit it was she was wearing. Hilde had said he hated Lorna. Could he have scented Lorna on these clothes? Could he *know* these clothes? Her flesh crawled a little at that thought. She got up abruptly and went out to the green and white stable to find a sleepy looking Lenny. It seemed to take him a long time to saddle Topaz. Diane moved restively and slapped at a fly. Her riding habit was very tight. It made her uncomfortable.

It was fiercely hot. The sun pounded down. A breathless day. She realized she had been foolish to come, for already she was soaked in perspiration, panting in her tight clothes. Topaz too seemed restless and uneasy. She moved skittishly when Diane approached and it took some coaxing before she could mount. Once aboard, Diane waved to Lenny and, drawing the back of her hand across her damp face, headed Topaz into the bridal path that led toward the Extension, and around her the summer woods with its oak, beech, sycamore, ash, elm and hickory, closed in like a rustling green cocoon. Somewhere a twig snapped and the day sounds of the woods were stilled suddenly. A soft gray cloud drifted across the burning sun, the shadow edges softened and the light filtered through the leaves dimly so that she seemed to be riding down a dim hushed natural corridor. The heat was oppressive.

Then as she rode, she began to think of the teenage Lorna, riding through these woods in this very habit. Wild, green-eyed, her thick black hair flying or caught in a bun at the back. For a wistful moment she felt she *was* that young Lorna, with Duke thundering behind her, racing through the summer woods, feeling their blood pound, caught up in the miracle of first love.

Dark thoughts surged through her. Would part of Duke, that wild young part, belong forever to Lorna? Her eyes

glazed over with tears and she brought her hand up sharply to dash them away and accidentally struck her mount a glancing blow on the ear. Topaz was nervous today. She bolted.

Diane was thrown back in the saddle. She lost the reins. Aware of the danger, and clinging desperately to the flying palomino's neck, she kept her head low in fear of overhanging branches and tried to sooth the frightened mare.

Lorna's clothes. . . . Hot and sticky, she felt as if they suddenly gripped her, held her to the saddle, kept her from moving, from reaching the reins. Her breath rasped in her throat. Behind her she thought she could hear other hooves thundering. Near fainting, she envisioned another horse, a big black horse, materializing out of the woods behind her, a horse that would crash over her, through her. A ghostly horse with a ghostly rider. *Lorna*, overtaking her clothes.

In the suffocating heat, the riding clothes held her tighter. She could not seem to move. Topaz fled on in terror. They thundered forward, they had reached the place where the bridal path forked. Across the path to the left, the safe path, a branch had fallen. It was no real barricade. She tried to make the horse turn left but felt paralyzed, she could not seem to move in those sleeves, they held her like a straitjacket. Topaz made her own choice. Running like a deer, she thundered down the path to the right.

They were headed for the ravine.

Diane closed her eyes.

That deep rocky ravine where Francie had ended up. *Where*, she claimed, *Lorna had thrown her*. . . . Woods, ravine, this was all Queenscourt land. Lorna not only stalked the attic or the lonely corridors. She ranged all the land that belonged to Queenscourt.

Branches rushed by, they caught at her hair. She talked, she tried to soothe Topaz, she fought to stay aboard her, she thought—hoped—Topaz had slowed her pace a little. Ahead loomed the ravine. If Topaz didn't make it, neither would she. They would end up together, tangled and smashed in those cool rocky depths, horse and rider.

Chalk up another one for Lorna, she thought crazily. These are Queenscourt lands. *Her* lands. And I dared invade them!

Something white wavered in front of them. And now, as in

a nightmare, she saw what it was. A rag flapping on a wire drawn across the bridal path in front of the ravine.

Topaz screamed, a wild almost human scream. She braked as best she could and reared up, pawing the air with her front hooves.

Diane, her fingers twined in Topaz' flaxen mane, felt her body lifted gently, leaving the saddle. She seemed to twirl through space, her fingers wrenched free, the trees seemed to take off at an angle and she was falling.

She hit the ground with a solid thud and lost consciousness.

Chapter 22

When she came to, she was staring up at the sky, at the sun glinting brilliantly through the waving branches of an oak tree overhead, and somewhere in the distance there was the sound of hooves pounding toward her. She lay still, not moving, not comprehending, wishing the noise would go away.

Then a big roan horse pounded up and the rider jumped off, bent over her. "Diane!"

It was Cole. She wondered idly what he was doing here. Why wasn't he off somewhere drinking ... at the Club ... somewhere.

"Can you move?" he asked anxiously. "Where does it hurt?"

It didn't hurt anywhere. She felt numb all over. The light was too bright. She blinked her eyes and they fluttered closed. When she opened them again, he had scooped her up, set her on the horse in front of him. "I'll take you home," he said. And as they cantered through a break in the hedge between Westwind and Vair Hall, she realized he meant *his* home, not hers.

She started to protest, but Cole had reined up at a side door and said, "If anybody ever needed a drink, you do. You should see your face." Then he lifted her up and he was carrying her, very gently, into his house.

"Cole," she said weakly as he strode along, "what happened?"

"You were thrown," he said. "Keep still. I'll get a doctor."

A doctor ... hospital ... away from Duke ... free field for Francie.

"No," she said faintly. And when he had deposited her on a big black leather divan in his trophy room and was pouring some sparkling liquid from a crystal decanter into a shot

glass, she said more strongly, "I don't need a doctor. I'm all right."

"Nonsense," said Cole brusquely, and reached for the phone.

Diane gathered her strength. "I don't *want* a doctor," she said sharply. And sat up. It cost her, but she made it.

"Well, well," said Cole. "I see your fall didn't break your spirit. But you could still have a concussion." Still he looked relieved as he handed her the shot glass. Her hands shook and she spilled the liquor on her riding habit. Cole steadied her, and the fiery liquid gave her strength.

After one swallow, she gave him back the glass and was glad enough to collapse once more onto the divan and stare up at the hunting trophies which lined the wall, while he fixed himself a drink. They were, she realized, in the paneled trophy room which overlooked the hedge separating Vair Hall from Westwind. She had not seen it before, but it suited Cole. A rack of hunting rifles adorned one wall, and a couple of majestic stuffed heads of large animals stared down at them, sadly, she thought. Antlers jostled one another for space and there were silver cups and medals.

"I see you hunt," she observed.

"No, my father did," said Cole. "Those are all his medals, his trophies, his guns. I never liked hunting, though I'm a good shot. Here . . . drink it down, that's a good girl."

She felt better as the liquor burned her throat. Things came back into focus.

"Thanks," she said gratefully.

He joined her on the sofa, took one of her hands. "Your hands are cold," he said sharply. "Something's scared the hell out of you. Was it the fall?"

"I just want to get out of these tight clothes," she muttered, feeling their grip.

"Here? Now?" Cole brightened.

"No, I'll just sit here for a minute and then go. Cole, did you see it?"

"See what?" He let go of her hand, leaned back and studied her.

"Somebody had strung a wire across the bridal path just in front of the ravine. And a rag or something had caught on it. It was flapping. Topaz saw it and shied and reared up and threw me. But if she hadn't, if she'd charged straight ahead,

the wire would have caught her and we'd both have plummeted into the ravine."

"Wire?" said Cole blankly. "I didn't see any wire."

"Well, go look again," she said grimly. "There's a wire down there, all right, and any rider on that path could be in danger."

"No, Diane. I was looking straight at the ravine when I picked you up. There was no rag, no wire."

It hit her like a brick wall. She stared at him, her face whitening.

"Lorna," she gasped. "I'm wearing Lorna's clothes!"

"Oh, you wouldn't be such a fool!" he protested.

She looked down in horror, remembering . . . remembering how these sleeves had seemed to grip her viciously, so she'd been unable to move. That wasn't fear—that was Lorna! And then the vision of the wire, the rag—that was Lorna too! She'd been hallucinating. A dead woman controlling her . . . through her clothes.

Suddenly the jacket she wore clung to her in a terrible embrace, the collar seemed to have her by the throat, the sleeves were holding her in a viselike grip. "Cole," she gasped. "Help me . . . get this . . . off." She tugged at the jacket.

Cole gave it a wrench. The jacket ripped as it tore free. "How did you ever get into the damned thing?" he wondered. "It's smaller than you are." He tugged off her boots.

The blouse seemed to twist around her, the riding pants clenched her in a murderous grip.

"These clothes," she gasped. "They're strangling me. Do you have something I could wear?"

Cole left the room, returned with a short white raincoat. "A young lady left this one day when the weather cleared suddenly," he smiled.

Diane was perspiring. "I've got to . . . get them off!" She tried desperately to unbutton the choking collar, but the buttonhole eluded her shaking fingers.

"You're soaked from the heat and the exercise," observed Cole. "That's what's plastered your clothes to you."

No, that wasn't it, that wasn't it. Her head ached with heat and effort and fear and exhaustion and a bad spill. But if she stayed in these clothes much longer, they would, she felt, drain the life from her. Cole went out and closed the door, and she gave a mighty heave and ripped all the buttons off

her blouse. It burst open and she tore out a sleeve getting it off. The riding pants were of sterner stuff. She seized a pair of scissors from the table and slashed at them viciously, ripped and tore and cut until they lay in pieces on the floor. Then slowly she pulled the white raincoat about her and sat with her arms clasped around her until Cole called, "Are you decent?"

She looked up when he entered. "They were killing me," she said somberly. "If the fabric had held, they'd have bent my bones."

"Nonsense." His voice was rough. "They're two sizes too small. How you got into them I don't know, but once up on the horse exercising in this boiling weather and frightened to boot, you simply perspired until they were stuck to you like adhesive tape. Clothes have no power to kill."

These do, she thought dully. She gave him a wan look. "Would you take me home, Cole? And find Topaz and take her back to Hilde? She's probably back at the stable by now, but I—I don't feel like calling and explaining what happened. And please—" her voice broke—"don't say anything about this to anyone."

He leaned forward. "Did you see anyone, hear anyone else in the woods?"

She said reluctantly, "I thought I heard hooves, another rider. But it was probably you. And I heard a twig snap somewhere, but that could have been some small animal, a squirrel, a dog."

He frowned. "I don't like it," he said, drumming his fingers. "I'll go out there and take another look after a while. And I'll round up Topaz for you. Maybe there was a wire after all and the horse struck it and broke it. It could be lying there against a tree."

She had no real hope that it would be there. But if it should be. . . . She met his gaze, troubled. "But who would do such a thing, Cole?"

"That crowd from the Extension might do anything. In the old days they went in for occasional barn burnings. Now I guess it's wired bridle paths."

She shivered, having visions of the people from the Extension in a body armed with torches surrounding a barn. "You don't mean they all—"

"No, of course not. I just mean there are plenty of sneaks

down there. One of them gets mad at someone, he sneaks out by night and sets a fire. Or takes a pot shot from behind a bush. The veneer of civilization is a bit thinner at the Extension."

She remembered the thrown stick, the stable door that had slammed shut. "But I've never done anything to them. I don't even *know* them."

He was kneading her hands, warming them. "No, but they know Duke," he said quietly. "They know him of old."

She looked up sharply, trying to understand what he meant by the peculiar inflection of his last remark, and saw that he was looking at her intently; the sun through the big windows just behind the divan washed over him and made him look young, almost boyish.

"Diane," he said huskily. And before she realized what he was doing his arms were around her in a smothering embrace and he was murmuring her name against her hair.

"No, Cole!" She pushed him away. "I—I'm sorry," she said. "I guess I made you think I would—"

"You didn't make me think anything," he interrupted her fiercely. "It was the thought of you maybe lying dead out there, killed because Duke made enemies! Diane. . . ." He leaned down again, lifted her chin with one finger. "It can't have escaped you that I'm crazy about you."

Through the open window behind her, the bushes by the house rustled. "There's someone out there," she said sharply.

"Nonsense," said Cole. "Who would bother to peek in my window? Now yours, that would be different. Come on, I'll take you home, then round up the horse and get your car."

"I'm being an awful lot of bother to you," she said, troubled.

He squeezed her hand. "I should have such trouble," he said quietly, "all my life."

In her short white raincoat, Cole took her back to Queenscourt. She was not aware that he had brought along the destroyed riding habit until he plunked it onto a chair in the hall.

"Diane," he said, "will you be all right here?"

"I'll just wobble to the living room and sit and collect myself," she said soberly.

"That's the girl." He gave her shoulder an awkward pat. He'd get over this infatuation, she thought, watching him

saunter away. She was just a "new girl in town." But . . . it would be awkward if Duke found out about it. She sat there, her head muzzy.

So sure was she it had all been a hallucination that it was a shock when Cole phoned and said, "Topaz made her own way back. And I found the wire—broken. The rag must have blown away. I think you should give up riding for a while."

"I already have," she said with a shudder. "Nothing would induce me to ride down that path again."

"Good. I'll have a word with Duke. We'll see if we can't put the fear of God into that bunch out at the Extension."

She thought of Duke, inundated by other troubles. "No—let me tell him, Cole."

"All right," he said reluctantly. "I'll warn Ginny and Hilde. We're the only people who use those paths, since it's Queenscourt land."

"I know," she said in a sober voice.

"I'm going for the car now—I'll leave it in the drive," he said, shushing her thanks.

She was still sitting there in her borrowed raincoat and her underwear when Duke strode in, frowning. "Diane, I saw your riding habit—what's left of it—in the hall. What happened?"

Saying Lorna's clothes had tried to kill her would certainly send her winging to Virginia. "I took a tumble," she said defiantly. "Cole happened along, and I had to get those too-tight clothes off before I could be sure I hadn't broken something. He lent me some scissors—and a raincoat so I could decently leave."

Duke looked at her in amazement. "What are you doing," he asked, "wearing clothes that have to be removed surgically? Are you out of your mind?"

With her shattered nerves, she wanted to scream at him. Instead she tried another tack. "How's Francie?" she asked woodenly.

His expression hardened. "Wearing clothes that fit her," he said, "and keeping her seat on a horse."

"She didn't always keep her seat," Diane flung back. "We nearly ended up in the same ravine!"

"And you wanted to buy Topaz." He shook his head.

"I still do," flashed Diane. "Even if I never do more than

feed her sugar and stroke her lovely mane. She's sweet and lovable and this had nothing to do with her."

"Your horse runs away with you and it has nothing to do with the horse? Then am I to presume you forced the horse deliberately into danger?"

"You're to presume nothing of the kind! Something frightened Topaz and she bolted. There was a branch down at the fork in the path, and she turned down the wrong path. At the ravine there was this—this wire strung across the bridal path with a white rag and she panicked and threw me."

"Wire? Rag?" he said alertly. "Who knew you were going to be riding that path?"

"Nobody. Well, maybe I mentioned it to Ben."

"And you say there was a branch down in your way, to prevent you riding the safe path to the Extension?"

"Well—" she tried to remember, but her head ached. "There was a branch down. Topaz could have jumped it easily, but she was frightened and she didn't." She added hopelessly, "I'm going to stop riding for a while, Duke."

"I'd feel better if you would—until I can ride with you," he muttered, and ran a worried hand through his hair. "I knew I shouldn't bring you here in the first place," he said. "I've got too many enemies here."

She wanted to say bitterly that *she* had only one enemy who mattered—Lorna.

Chapter 23

Duke was uncommunicative at dinner, frowning and studying a newspaper article about shadowy criminal syndicate forces taking over legitimate corporations. That was the second article she'd seen him reading about that, she thought, as she carried the dishes to the kitchen and piled them in the sink.

Duke was in the living room, fiddling with the TV set, when she returned. "Did you call about it?" And when Diane said no, "Well, get him out here tomorrow."

"No," said Diane evenly.

Duke turned to look at her. "What do you mean 'no'?"

Her headache sharpened her voice. "It isn't on our budget. It's out."

Duke said coldly, "I seem to recall that this is my house."

"That you're about to sell to Francie Pelton."

"So that's it! You're jealous of Francie."

She flushed. That it was true made her doubly angry. "Your house or not, I will *not* call the TV repairman."

"Diane," he said patiently, "we don't have to pay cash. He'll bill us."

"Back in Virginia, we *paid* our bills," said Diane frostily. "We didn't just *owe* them."

For a moment she thought he was going to strike her.

Into that charged moment, the phone rang.

Diane snatched it up. "Hello!" And then, at the obscenities that poured over the line, "What? Who are you calling? How dare you—"

Duke took the instrument from her hand, listened a moment. "If I get my hands on you, buster," he said coldly, "I'll break your neck!" And slammed it back on the hook.

A moment later it rang again.

Diane moved to pick it up, but Duke got there ahead of

her. He listened a moment, then said, "The same to you, bud," and crashed it back on the hook.

It rang again.

"Let it ring," he said morosely.

"But it could be important," she said. "It could be Cobbie."

"Let it ring." Tersely. He got up, thrust his hands into his trouser pockets and strode around the room, a lithe, tall, dangerous figure. "Why the hell did I ever let you get mixed up in this?" he muttered. "What was I thinking of?" He stopped in front of her.

"I'm sorry about the TV set," she said penitently. "We'll manage some way."

"Hang the TV set," he said. "Diane, I've got to get you out of here. It's getting ugly."

"I won't go." Obstinate. "If you send me away, I'll taxi right back here C. O. D. and wail and pound on the door. Think what people will say!"

He stared at her, as at an adversary who might—just might—defeat him.

"I have to run up to Cleveland tomorrow. I'll be gone overnight and there's no way I can take you with me. The men I'm meeting wouldn't appreciate it if I took a wife along."

The bombshell burst on her all at once. Alone. Overnight. In Queenscourt. She moistened her lips. "All right," she said, a little unsteadily. "I'll be here when you get back."

"Here!" he shouted. "You'll be at a hotel!"

A face appeared at the open casement that reached down to ground level. "Who'll be at a hotel?" demanded Ginny. "I just toddled over to ask you people to come over and meet an old school friend from Charleston who just flew in. I could see you through the window sitting here, but you weren't answering your phone and I thought there was something wrong with the line. But if this is a bad moment—" She turned to go, rolling her eyes as if to say, *newlyweds and their fights!*

"The phone was off the hook because we've been getting obscene phone calls," said Diane clearly. "Duke is furious about it, and since he has to go out of town tomorrow and stay overnight, he wants to put me in a hotel. I think that's ridiculous and we're fighting about it."

"It certainly isn't ridiculous," said Ginny firmly. "People who make obscene phone calls sometimes do other irrational things—not at all nice. But why stay at a hotel when we have all those empty bedrooms over at Westwind? Come spend the night with me. You can help me entertain my guest from Charleston."

That was exactly what Diane had hoped she would suggest. She shot Duke a look of triumph. "I accept your invitation, Ginny, and we'll trundle right over to meet your guest."

"You'll like her," said Ginny. "She has a Southern drawl and she believes in the double standard and mint juleps and 'boys will be boys'—I always find her refreshing after these hard-bitten Midwestern types." She smiled blandly at Duke. "She used to have a crush on you, did you know that?"

Another one! Diane groaned inwardly.

"No, I didn't know that," said Duke shortly. "And I expect you made it up to suit the occasion."

Ginny tossed her head. "No matter," she said lightly. "Diane can judge for herself. Women have an instinct about these things."

Duke snorted.

"We'll be right over," promised Diane.

"Good, I'll just go back through the hedge and see how the mint juleps are progressing."

"There," said Diane airily, when Ginny was out of sight, "you see how easy that was?"

"The gods were with you." Duke gave her a grim look. "What will you do if they desert you?"

"I'll meet that when I come to it," she said sturdily, and went to fix her face and take an aspirin before accompanying him to Westwind.

The friend from Charleston was named Aimee Shelton. She was little and copper-haired and smiling, and talked with a slurred Southern drawl Diane found very attractive. The admiring glances Aimee showered on Duke she found considerably less attractive.

Duke was imperturbable.

Aimee talked vivaciously about everything, from her Creole ancestry—her people were Governors in Louisiana and all that back before time began, you understand—to the miracle of Diane's opening up Queenscourt so lonely Ginny could have neighbors again. And what was new around here?

"Outside of Duke and Diane, nothing," shrugged Ginny. "Oh, there's Francie. She's back."

Aimee wrinkled her nose. "I never liked Francie," she asserted. "So predatory."

Ginny cast a look at Diane which was almost merry. "I couldn't have described her better," she murmured.

Catching Duke's warning glance, Diane held her peace. Plainly the sacred subject of Francie Pelton must not be bandied about by the new Mrs. Tarrant.

"These juleps are delicious," she said recklessly. "I could drink them all night."

"Well, you aren't going to," said Duke, rising abruptly. "I've an early day tomorrow."

They were interrupted by the arrival of Uncle Trench. "You aren't leaving," he said plaintively, "just when I get here?"

"How are you, Trencherton?" said Duke. "I'd stick around and we'd exchange a few good stories, but I'm getting up early tomorrow." His face betrayed his fondness for the old man. "My bride been behaving herself?"

"So-so," said Uncle Trench. "I keep an eye on her from over here, you know. I'll let you know if she gets out of line."

Duke laughed, the most light-hearted laugh she'd heard from him recently. "You do that, Trencherton," he said. "She needs watching!"

And they said their good-bys and walked back across the dark lawn to Queenscourt.

Perhaps it was talking to Uncle Trench, she thought, but his mood had certainly changed by the time they reached the house. "How about early to bed?" he quipped. "We're in need of wisdom around here."

She smiled at him half-heartedly. Her headache still hadn't left her and it was difficult not to grimace with the pain, so that when she had undressed and gotten into a sea-green nylon nightgown that floated around her, and he came up behind her and took her in his arms, startling her, she went rigid.

"Did I scare you?" he murmured, his lips caressing her neck. Her head gave a throb and she winced and pulled away.

"What's the matter?" he asked. "Do you find me such an indifferent lover?"

"No, Duke." She looked at him through eyes half-blinded by pain—a tall figure, distinguished, standing there in his light gray robe—and put a hand to her throbbing head. "It's just that I've got a grinding headache."

His face hardened. "You had a headache last night too, Diane," he said silkily. "Be careful it doesn't become a habit."

"It was my fall, Duke," she wailed. "I hit my head. It knocked me out!"

His face cleared, his voice was concerned. "You didn't tell me that," he said. "I suppose it didn't occur to you to call a doctor?"

"It occurred to Cole," she said, "but I talked him out of it. I'm all right. I just have a headache, that's all."

"Diane, Diane." Duke reached over and stroked her silky blonde hair. "What am I going to do with you? I love you so much."

That was what she'd been waiting to hear. She flung herself into his arms and burst into tears. Duke soothed her, he stroked her hair, he held her in his arms—and then he led her firmly toward her bed. "Sleep," he commanded. "It's possible you have a concussion. Tomorrow I'll take you to the doctor myself."

He loves me, she thought, climbing into the big bed. *And that's all that matters.* And fell instantly asleep.

She woke refreshed, to see with astonishment that Duke was just coming through the door whistling, with a coffee cup in his hand.

"Breakfast in bed?" she laughed. "I must rate!"

"You do rate," he said. "Drink up, get dressed, and we'll catch a doughnut at a drive-in before I take you to the doctor. Your appointment's in an hour. So hurry."

She swallowed her coffee, put on a buttercup yellow linen dress that matched her sunny mood, yellow sandals, and marched downstairs jauntily to join him, persuaded him to cancel her appointment because she felt so well, but accompanied him into town, saying she'd scrounge a ride home.

On the way into town, flashing past the green fields, the handsome hardwood trees shimmering with leaves, the

massed orange daylilies clumped by the roadside, Duke was silent and Diane said lightly, "A penny for your thoughts!"

"Someone," he told her, "is artificially maneuvering the stock. Must be costing them a packet but they're driving the stock down when it should be going up. Now that I've bought all I could with borrowed money," he added ironically. "It's just as if they're looking over my shoulder, watching me."

She frowned. "Do you think organized crime is trying to take over Tarrant Steel?"

"Could be," he said noncommittally. "Hard to prove."

"But you must know who owns stock in your company!"

"Oh, the owners of record are on the books. But how about the undertable deals some of those owners have made with other people? Some of those names are straw men, Diane. The man who sends in the proxy might be just a figure-head. And remember a lot of our stock is held by other corporations, and *they* have a way of changing management. I'm going to take over the Presidency if I can and straighten things out—and there's a lot of opposition, as you've gathered. The assets are being transferred around to interlocking corporations. On the face of it, it looks all right but—I don't like it. But whoever's behind it hasn't surfaced yet, and Chester Banning is so wrapped up in that nitwit wife of his that he can't concentrate on anything." He sighed. "The stockholders' meeting will tell the story. It will all surface then."

Diane realized then that those shimmering meadows rushing by them weren't meadows at all . . . they were bright highways to disaster, and behind every handsome hardwood tree lurked some new danger to the fabulous—but fragile—industrial complex known as Tarrant Steel.

She said gloomily, "Do you think we'll make it out of the woods?"

If she'd expected a cheerful answer, she didn't get one. "No way to tell yet, Diane," he said. "It's like riding out a gale in a rowboat. You have to keep hoping."

"And be a strong swimmer," she muttered. "In case you capsize."

He chuckled. "That too."

They had reached a sleazy district now of deserted storefronts, wholesale-retail businesses, a hodgepodge of dingy buildings. "Up there's Union Hall—the Local's headquarters," he said, and pointed up the street.

"That's where they decide about the strike?" she asked, fascinated.

"That's where," he said, stopping for a traffic light.

A man on the sidewalk suddenly swung out toward their car, came up on Duke's side. He was a big man with massive shoulders and a leonine head with a shock of coarse black hair and shrewd brown eyes, narrowed in the sun. His clothes were interesting, she thought. He was done up entirely in vivid shades of blue. A turquoise blue suit and a brilliant aqua-blue shirt open at the neck, but displaying a silver-and-turquoise bolo. She had the vague feeling she'd seen him before, and at Duke's words, knew it had not been in the flesh but in the newspapers.

"Hello, Mike," said Duke. "What's new?"

The big man studied him. "You gonna throw in with us on this thing, sonny? Or sit it out and get frozen out yourself?"

Duke said, "Don't call me 'sonny,' and it isn't my fight—yet. I'm not exactly in control of the show."

"No, but you got influence." The narrow brown eyes passed Duke and studied Diane as if photographing her for later reference. She flushed under that critical scrutiny.

"So have you," said Duke. "If you hold your end level until I'm in the saddle again, I'll see what I can do for you."

This was greeted by a horse laugh and a sardonic, "I'll bet!" And then a more thoughtful, "Don't know if I can oblige. The boys are getting hard to control. They want to go out, get some decent wages, a fair package."

"No one ever said I wasn't fair," grumbled Duke.

"Well, you wasn't dealin' with me then," said Mike.

"That's right. I was dealing with your predecessor, and a good man he was."

"Yep." Mike picked his teeth with a match. "He was that. And he liked you." He grinned challengingly. "Always wondered why."

"Throw in with me and find out," grinned Duke. "We're holding up traffic."

"Wouldn't want to do that." Mike stepped back. "Just so's we understand each other."

"You came through loud and clear," said Duke, nodding and stepping on the gas pedal.

"What was that all about?" asked Diane wonderingly as the car sped on.

"That was the new head of the Local asking me if I was going to tread on his toes."

"And are you?" she asked bluntly.

"Depends on where he puts his feet," said Duke grimly. "If he's standing where he should be, no. If he gets under my feet, I'll stomp him." He flashed a sardonic smile at her. "Assuming, of course, I'm in a position to."

He let her out on Main Street, stuffed a big bill in her purse, said, "So you won't run short. Buy lunch. You're looking thin, Diane." He hesitated. "Sure you don't want to see that doctor?"

She shook her head. "Have a good trip, Duke. A successful trip."

He grinned. "The words are, 'Come back with your shield or on it,' " he said, and drove away.

She watched him go and her heart went with him. *Just come back to me*, she thought with a wrench. *Never mind the shield. Just come back to me and forget about Francie.*

She strolled through the cosmetics department on the first floor of the Lennox Department Store, sniffed exotic perfumes, considered buying a new lipstick and decided against it. Her thoughts were on Duke. This meant so much to him, this proxy fight. Tarrant Steel was his whole life. *What if he lost?*

She stopped before an eyeshadow display, biting her lips, saw a salesgirl bearing down on her and hurried on, taking the escalator up to lingerie, strolling through beautiful displays of filmy, lace-frothed nightgowns.

If Duke lost control of Tarrant Steel, she might well lose Duke. That was what it amounted to. Whether she lost him instantly or by inches was not the question. She would be a symbol of failure—and Lorna and Francie symbols of success.

That thought was enough to ruin the morning.

Stopping by the tearoom for lunch, unmindful of Duke's admonition that she was too thin, Diane ordered a chicken salad sandwich and a glass of iced tea. She had grown used to eating them for lunch in drugstores back in Virginia when times weren't so flush—and times might not be so flush again, she reminded herself grimly.

She was feeling rather glad there was no one there she knew, when across the crowded tearoom she thought she saw

a familiar face. She peered at a little clot of women sitting at a round table talking animatedly.

As she watched, the group parted a little and she realized she was looking at Francie Pelton. Dressed in vivid green, Francie was like a lithe leopard peering through jungle foliage, poised to spring. She looked up, met Diane's eyes, and there was an indefinable triumph in that gaze that made Diane uncomfortable.

Her sandwich arrived but suddenly she wasn't hungry. She sipped her iced tea, wondering who the other women were. They looked vaguely familiar, but she couldn't be sure—which meant probably that she had met them at the Club, that they were wives of the lower administrative echelon of the Tarrant Steel empire. As they got up to go she did recognize one of them—Frieda Payne.

Somehow that troubled her. If Francie, with her large bloc of stock in Tarrant Steel and control of the foundry, was lunching with Frieda, whose husband was bucking for a Vice Presidency in Tarrant Steel, and a lot of other women whose husbands were undoubtedly bucking too, what did that mean?

She was worried for Duke—and she was worried for herself. That triumphant gleam in Francie's eyes boded no good.

She paid her check and bought a newspaper, the Mac-Queensport Courier. The state of the world was apparently very bad. Strikes, plane crashes, earthquakes and insurrections met her gaze. And on the front page a small juicy article about some human bones being pulled out of the lake on the Huntsberry Road by a fisherman whose line had tangled in the weeds. Unidentified. Diane grimaced. Morbid! She closed the paper and moved restlessly around the department store. As she reached an aisle lined with dozens of color TV sets, all blaring, she heard "... a wildcat strike at the Mac-Queen Foundry. A picket line has formed across the gates. There are some reports of violence. We have no details. For further information, watch the Six O'Clock News."

Diane sighed. More trouble. She'd better get the TV set fixed. Duke would want to hear the news. And maybe the bill wouldn't come in right away ... she hoped not. She was about to call Ginny and ask her who'd be good when a voice behind her called, "Diane! Diane Tarrant!" and she turned to see Kitty coming toward her in a lime jersey shirtdress, her arms full of packages.

"Heard the news about the strike?" asked Kitty.

Diane shrugged with a confidence she didn't feel. "It's a wildcat strike. Just at the MacQueen Foundry. It isn't the whole of Tarrant Steel that's out on strike."

"Strikes have a way of spreading." Kitty angled a look at her. "Today MacQueen Foundry—tomorrow the whole of Tarrant Steel. I do hope Duke can cope with it."

Diane hoped so too.

"I mean until after the stockholders' meeting there's no one at the *helm*," said Kitty. "Leda Banning has run off to Lake Tahoe with her newest admirer and Chester Banning took a plane in hot pursuit after them. You'd think he'd divorce the wench, rather than run around *retrieving* her from motel rooms! Must be humiliating!"

Love's darker aspects, Diane thought gloomily. "I feel sorry for Chester Banning," she said.

"Oh, everyone feels *sorry* for him," said Kitty impatiently. "But the whole thing's so hilarious!" She adjusted her arm-load of packages. "Well, I must run. These things are getting heavy!" With a gay wave, she was gone.

Sobered, Diane found a phone and dialed Ginny, who said, "Diane, where *are* you? Cole has been running around peering through the windows at Queenscourt. He insists something's happened to you. Do you want to talk to him? He's right here."

Before Diane could answer, Cole's voice cut in. "Diane, your car was parked in the drive and when you didn't answer the bell, I was afraid something was wrong."

"Duke had to catch a plane. He dropped me off in town. I'm about to take a taxi home."

"Where are you?"

"In a phone booth at Lennox'."

"Stay there," commanded Cole. "I'll park on the roof and join you in the tearoom." And before she could protest, she heard him say to Ginny, "The girl's accident prone!" and bang down the receiver.

Feeling half amused, half annoyed, Diane went back to the tearoom and drank another iced tea.

"You might have given a fellow a ring and told him you were going to be out all day," scolded Cole when he arrived. "I was imagining all sorts of things, none of them cheerful."

That she, a married woman, should be asked to account to

her bachelor neighbor for her comings and goings never occurred to Diane as peculiar. Under the circumstances at Queenscourt she was glad for whatever shelter and protection she could get.

"We've been getting obscene phone calls," she explained. "Duke wanted me off the premises. I'm having dinner with Ginny and spending the night there."

"Obscene phone calls?" said Cole indignantly.

"Yes, they began last night. I suppose it has something to do with the strike."

Cole muttered something she didn't catch that sounded unprintable, and asked her if she'd lunched.

"Right here. Chicken salad sandwich and iced tea."

He laughed. "That's what I like about you, Diane. You look at people with those clear direct eyes and order iced tea when you could be ordering champagne. I never knew anyone like you."

"Then you haven't looked," said Diane firmly.

"Want to attend a county fair?" he asked suddenly. "They're having one over at Huntsberry."

"I haven't been to one in ages!" Diane's eyes sparkled, remembering county fairs back home in Virginia. Animal judging and sawdust and cotton candy and prizes for the best cake, the best canned fruit. It made her homesick.

They drove to Huntsberry and went to the fair. It was pretty much like those she remembered. They ate tall pointed ice cream cones and mile-long hot dogs, looked at rabbits and calves and chickens and ducks, rode laughing on a ferris wheel, and mingled with sun-browned farmers and townsfolk.

"Look right this way, Mrs. Tarrant," said a voice, and Diane turned sharply and a flashbulb went off, blinding her momentarily. "Thanks very much," said a laughing voice, and Cole muttered, "Let's get out of here," and they made their way to the parking lot and Cole's car.

"That's what I get for taking out a celebrity," he mocked, handing her in. "Want to see the seat of the Vair wealth and power?"

He drove her to Vairstown, which she didn't like nearly as well as MacQueensport but forebore saying so. It was essentially a grimy little place, smaller than MacQueensport, and dominated by the stark smoky edifices of the Vair Iron

Works. But even here the air was relatively clean; the clinging soot and grime were relics of a former era.

She mentioned the lack of pollution proudly, as Duke's doing. Cole hooted. "Do you think these people give a damn? Offer them another ten dollars a week versus the cleanest air in the country—put it up to a vote, you know what would happen? They'd vote for the ten bucks."

"You're a cynic," she accused him.

"And you're naive," he grumbled. And when she said she must get back, she'd be late for dinner, "So we'll be a little late. I'm invited too, you know. An extra man for the houseguest from Charleston who's stopped off on her way to San Francisco."

"Rather a detour, isn't it?" said Diane. "Everyone has restless feet. Me, I never cared to move around."

"And you're the kind of girl a man could settle down with," he said. "Even a man like me."

In companionable silence they rode back to Queenscourt. "Watch out for the phone," warned Diane, getting out of the car. "It bites." She waved at Ginny who was just opening an upstairs window at Westwind, and Ginny waved back. "She has such lovely clothes," sighed Diane.

"Always had," said Cole. "Ginny went in for misty colors, soft azure blues and misty greens and mother-of-pearl grays to match her eyes, while Lorna hit you hard with black and white and green, and Francie hit you harder with orange and flame and scarlet and boas and sequins and what not."

"A sliding scale," murmured Diane, picking up the mail where it had been dropped through the brass slot in the front door. None of it looked important and she dropped it on a marble-topped table in the hall.

Cole waited downstairs while she tossed her night things into an overnight bag, slipped into a beige jersey with a narrow gold belt, ran a comb through her hair, a lipstick across her soft mouth, and ran down to see him slamming down the phone.

"Another one of those calls?"

"Yep," he said. "Duke's right, you shouldn't stay here alone. A few of those calls and you'd be scared to death."

I'm scared to death now, she thought soberly. Glad to be leaving my own house, glad to be running to Ginny's.

The lady of Westwind greeted them at her front door,

looking luminous in palest lavender nubby silk with flowing lines that offset her thinness. A long string of rough-cut amethysts hung around her neck, and her silver-blond hair was held by amethyst-ornamented combs. She led them in to dinner at her perfectly appointed table, and Diane felt wistful as she picked up her napkin of pale pink Irish linen and looked across the pale pink linen cloth, past a forest of delicately twined silver candelabra with slender pink tapers alight, to her poised hostess.

"Where's Uncle Trench?" she asked.

"Something he ate for lunch disagreed with him," said Ginny. "He's having a light dinner in his room while Nora Allerton reads him thrillers."

All through dinner Aimee, wearing a rosebud pink crepe, midcalf length, and a rather too-arch smile, kept up a running conversation directed at Cole. Diane ate her way through a number of delicious things, ending with lime ice and moist angelfood cake topped with swirls of white frosting. Ginny was a fragile doll at the head of her table, dispensing hospitality and small talk with effortless ease. And afterward they all sat on the dark terrace drinking mint juleps from tall frosted glasses while the music of the stereo drifted softly out to them.

Not if she lived to be a hundred, thought Diane gloomily, would she be able to manage a house like Ginny. Not if she had all the money in the world. She wondered suddenly if her party would be a failure. Somehow it hadn't occurred to her. A party was a party. You invited your friends and they came, they enjoyed it, they went away and said it had been fun. This was different. Most of the guests would be strangers to her, though not to Duke. They would compare her with her predecessor, perhaps unfavorably.

She was glad when the evening was over and she could retreat into the pretty Williamsburg green guest room Ginny had given her. Ginny used lots of muted Williamsburg colors; they suited her Mount Vernon Colonial house with its square columns. But Ginny herself was certainly no Martha Washington, plump and comforting. She was thin and swift in her movements, and arrogant in a light insolent sort of way. Born and bred to wealth and taste. . . .

Diane lingered in her bath, slipped into a sheer nightgown and pale silk robe and padded on satin slippers across the

pale sculptured rug to admire again the delicate canopied four-poster with its flounced coverlet, the dainty little dressing table with its ornate French mirror that stood in front of the window.

The window. It looked directly out at Queenscourt. She went to the window and stood gazing out. Before her loomed the great house, dark and forbidding, with steep slate roofs and massive chimneys. Houses were like people—Ginny's light and soft-toned like herself. And Queenscourt dark and majestic—as Lorna undoubtedly had been.

As she herself was not.

The thought was somehow ashes in her mouth. Duke didn't feel she was up to meeting things there. Had she . . . failed him? Her eyes misted over with tears as she leaned against the window, wishing Duke had stayed.

She was about to turn away when she saw a light in her bedroom window in that dark house. A flashlight? Or a candle? The light was weak and seemed to flicker.

She pressed closer to the window, trying to see. It was windy and a tree branch waved in her way, obscuring her vision. She moved impatiently. There it was again. A glow wafting behind the sheer curtains. And then a figure that wavered dark against the light.

Chapter 24

A prowler! Just what Duke had feared. She turned and ran downstairs, to find Ginny relaxing on a chaise longue, her amethyst necklace catching the light, sipping a mint julep.

"I have to call the police," said Diane tensely. "Someone's broken into Queenscourt."

"What!" Ginny was on her feet.

"I saw a light in my bedroom just now."

Ginny stared at her. "Diane, I've been sitting here for the last ten minutes looking in that direction and the house has been *completely dark*."

That rocked her. She flashed a look at the house. Certainly it was dark now.

"Diane," said Ginny patiently. "I think Frieda—knucklehead that she is—may have something with her theories and her German grandmother. Maybe you're—well, sensitive to things other people don't see."

"No." Diane backed away from that thought. "No, I'm not."

"There was no light," said Ginny. "No light, Diane. If you want me to, I'll go over with you. I'll take Uncle Trench's automatic."

Diane bit her lip. "All right, let's go. I can't stand here while Queenscourt is ransacked. I'll get my keys upstairs."

"He keeps his gun in the desk in the library," said Ginny, meeting her at the door with a blue-black snub-nosed weapon. "I hope I can fire this thing," she laughed. "It's been years since Uncle Trench taught me, and I was never a marksman." And to Diane's worried look, "Don't worry, I won't drop it or anything like that. And I wouldn't hesitate to shoot a prowler."

Together they crossed the dark lawn beneath the wind-tossed trees, Diane in bedroom slippers with her pale blue silk

robe thrown over her light gown, Ginny in the soft lavender dress she'd been wearing with the amethysts winking at her throat. An unlikely pair of enforcers. Diane cast a sidewise look at Ginny, walking along beside her with a light springy step. She decided that whatever frail Virginia Westcott of Westwind might lack in classical beauty, she certainly didn't lack physical courage.

Diane paused before the big front doors in the fitful moonlight. Now that they were here, confronting the dark pile of the house, it didn't seem like such a good idea. Reluctantly she fitted her key in the lock. Inside the hall was utterly dark. Ginny stood stoically on the doorstep, the gun dangling from her hand, while Diane found the switch. Bathed suddenly in light, the hall still looked ominous. Diane could hardly push her feet forward.

"What are you afraid of?" murmured Ginny. "There's nobody here."

"How do we know?" whispered Diane. "And now that we've turned on the lights, *they* know where we are."

She trailed Ginny up stairs that were never really light toward the inky darkness of the upper hall, moved down its gloomy length.

"Don't go rushing in, you might get hit over the head," Diane whispered as they approached her bedroom door.

"Stop," said Ginny. "You're scaring me."

The door was closed. Neither of them made any move to open it.

Heart pounding, Diane gave the door a push, reached in to flick the switch. Nothing happened.

"Your fuse is burned out," groaned Ginny.

That's what Duke said that other time, thought Diane, chilled. *But it wasn't so.*

"Well," said Ginny in an undecided way, "the moonlight is strong. We can see pretty well. Are you game?"

Diane steeled herself and stepped inside. A little wind ruffled her hair. She tensed, screamed as a dark shape zoomed past her head and out the window. She turned, colliding with Ginny, who said sharply, "That was only a bat."

Her gaze followed where Ginny was pointing. The casement was open, swaying in the breeze.

"But I left the windows closed," she said weakly.

"The catch wasn't fastened then and it blew open," said

Ginny. "With the fuse burned out, you couldn't have seen a light in here. What you saw was the moonlight striking the glass as the window swung open and shut. It could have looked very authentically like a prowler from a distance."

Diane took a deep breath. Ginny's explanation made sense. She went over and latched the window with trembling fingers.

"While we're here, we might as well check out Duke's room, since it adjoins," said Ginny patiently. "You'll sleep better, knowing we did."

Diane flashed her a grateful look. As the lights came on she saw a surprised look on Ginny's face and moved beside her to follow her gaze.

There on Duke's dresser was the picture of Lorna in the silver frame, the one with broken glass that she had carted to the attic. Those challenging eyes mocked her.

For a moment her head swam. She wanted to scream, to knock the picture down and stamp on it.

"That was Duke's favorite picture of Lorna," said Ginny dryly.

"I must have overlooked it," said Diane hastily. Who had put it here? Surely not Duke, and yet . . . Ginny said it was his favorite, and he had sent her away for the night. Was it possible that Duke himself had set the picture there? That he had returned, that he was here in the house?

Suddenly she did not want to find out. She moistened her lips. "Let's go down and lock up."

Ginny moved jauntily ahead. They were in the front hall when Diane paused. "Do you feel a breeze?"

"Yes." Ginny frowned. "And it's coming from the living room."

"But I closed those windows before I left," Diane protested. Those ground-level casements. . . .

"Come on," said Ginny rather loudly. "Let's explore the living room."

Reluctantly, Diane accompanied her, but it was Ginny who stepped into the dark living room first. "The lights," she muttered. "I can't find the lights."

Trying to reach the switch, Diane jostled Ginny's arm. There was a soft thud as the gun fell to the rug. They collided in the darkness as Ginny scrabbled for it. The moon came out from behind a cloud and cut a shaft of light.

through the windows and Diane saw that one of the long casements yawned open to the lawn.

And that same shaft of light silhouetted a large chair. And rising from the back of that chair, as if growing out of it, was a head. Black as the chair's silhouette, but moving a little.

Diane screamed and in turning slammed against the wall, striking the light switch. The wall brackets flared up and she heard Ginny's voice, sounding harsh and alarmed. "Uncle Trench, what are you doing here?"

Diane turned in amazement to see Trencherton Westcott come gliding around the big chair in his wheelchair.

"Aha," he cried. "Caught you, Missy! Saw you girls headed over here. Thought I'd follow and see the fun. Pushed on the window, it came right open."

"Uncle Trench," sighed Ginny, as Diane leaned weakly against the wall, "Don't you know I might have *shot* you?"

"When you're as old as I am, you can afford to take chances." Uncle Trench fixed her with his bright old knowing eyes. "I've got less to lose than you, being I've a much shorter time left on this planet than you."

"If Diane hadn't knocked the gun out of my hand, you'd have had no time left at all," said Ginny, picking up the gun and coming to stand beside him. "*Where* is that Allerton woman?"

Uncle Trench chuckled. "Slipped my sleeping pills into her water glass," he said proudly. "She fell asleep in her chair." He lifted his head. "Gave me an evening out."

"An evening out to scare people half to death," said Ginny grimly, and he lapsed into sulky silence as Diane locked up and Ginny wheeled him back across the lawn.

Diane studied him in profile as Ginny pushed him through the now bright moonlight onto Westwind's side terrace. She had a feeling Uncle Trench's door was going to be locked at night from now on.

"Wait until I get him to bed," Ginny called over her shoulder as she loaded him into the elevator, "and we'll have a sandwich."

Diane slumped into a chair and listened to the soft whirring of the elevator as it rose to the second floor. She had learned two things tonight: That the frail mistress of Westwind had nerves of steel. And that Trencherton Westcott was

more mobile than he looked, that he prowled by night in his wheelchair across the dark lawn.

She tried to remember locking that downstairs window, and couldn't. She had locked a lot of windows; it was conceivable she had missed one. And she *might* have pushed the upstairs window shut and the latch not caught.

But the picture. . . . Unless she was losing her mind—which now seemed a possibility—she had not put it there.

Had . . . Lorna?

She was still backing away from that thought when Ginny returned, saying briskly, "Let's raid the refrigerator."

The "raid" netted a delicious salad, cold chicken, tall glasses of milk and chocolate layer cake. After the night's chilling experience, Diane watched her hostess consume a hearty meal with wonder. "How can you eat?" she demanded. "My nerves are still jumping!"

Ginny considered her. "Living at Queenscourt is getting on your nerves," she said frankly. "I'd feel the same way—because I remember the awful turbulence of the people who lived there. They had such a terrible time."

Diane said, "Kitty insinuated Ronald MacQueen ran over Garnet. Deliberately. And shot himself in remorse. But Cammie said—"

"Oh, Cammie's protecting Lorna," scoffed Ginny. "Don't listen to her!"

Diane moistened her lips. "Isn't Cammie's story true?"

"Of course not," said Ginny carelessly. "Lorna ran down her stepmother in a blind rage. Everyone on Trowbridge Road knows that."

Diane sat back, her heart thumping. Lorna the deadly. . . . "How do they know?" she demanded, doggedly determined to get the whole picture.

Ginny frowned. "Well . . . it's so long ago now, I suppose there's no reason not to tell you. There wasn't any 'hit and run' stranger; that was just a story to satisfy the police. But I was walking over to the Club that day. My car had broken down, I had a swimming date and I was too impatient to wait for a taxi." She grinned. "We all had lots of energy in those days. And Emmeline Franklyn passed me in her Rolls—she drove it herself then—and I knew from her expression she'd seen something *awful*." She laughed. "Poor old butter-won't-melt-in-your-mouth Emmeline always called Lorna and me

her little angels. She had a chance to see one of her little angels in action that day, and I guess it broke her heart! I kept going, wondering what on earth had scared Emmeline, and there at the bend in the road I saw Lorna collapsed in Cole's arms, weeping her heart out, and poor stupid Cole comforting her. Both their cars were parked slaunchwise in the road, and all of a sudden Lorna jumped into her car and drove off—I'd stepped back in the bushes and I couldn't see the front end of it, but I'm sure it had a dented front end—and Cole's car took off in the opposite direction. I didn't see Garnet's body at the side of the road, but I was curious, so I walked back towards Queenscourt and I heard Lorna swing into the driveway at Queenscourt. So you see," said Ginny gravely, wrapping it all up, "I *know* Cammie lied. I saw Lorna at the scene, so she certainly wasn't asleep upstairs like Cammie claims. She was right there disposing of Garnet!"

"Didn't you tell anybody?" wondered Diane.

"Why should I?" Ginny shrugged. "The deed was done. Nothing I said was going to bring Garnet back. Of the two, frankly I preferred Lorna. But Ronald MacQueen went gray when he heard about the 'accident.' I guess he'd heard Lorna come slamming in and it wasn't too difficult for him to put two and two together and realized that Lorna had finally struck back at Garnet, she'd finally killed her."

"How do you know Lorna killed her? Maybe Cole—"

"Why else would she be crying?" demanded Ginny. "She hated Garnet, she wanted her dead. Do you think she'd have cried if Cole ran over her? Not Lorna! Jeff and Cammie found the body and Cammie whipped up that convenient lie about Lorna being asleep, she had to wake her. *But Ronald MacQueen knew.* And I guess he couldn't face the thought that Lorna had killed Garnet. He must have sat and brooded about it that night. It was about midnight when we heard the shot ring out. I thought at first it was a car backfiring on the road, and then I heard Lorna scream and I ran over and he was lying on the floor of the trophy room. And the joke of it is that everyone believed Cammie's story and Lorna got away with it clean, so he needn't have shot himself."

But maybe he'd have found life too painful, knowing. . . .

"Shortly after that Lorna went away to school. In California. She'd told me earlier that summer she had no intention of going, that nobody could drag her. But she went, just as

Ronald MacQueen had planned. I always thought she did it because she was running scared, afraid Cammie would break down and tell the real story, wanted to put lots of distance between her and this part of the world, be out of the state if Cammie confessed, and fight extradition. Anyway she went off to school in California and when several months went by and nothing happened, there wasn't any official outcry, she came right back. Didn't bother to notify the school, just took a plane home and took over Queenscourt as if she'd never been away. Gave a big party to celebrate her homecoming. We all went. It was a real bash." She grimaced. "Lorna was home, and the party was to tell us she was in the saddle now."

Diane sat there with her fingers frozen around her glass of milk. Now at last she knew the dimensions of the enemy. Lorna the cold-blooded murderess, Lorna the implacable, was stalking her.

Chapter 25

Before breakfast Diane called the TV repairman Ginny recommended, who promised he'd be out sometime that morning, and she went into the living room in time to hear Aimee announce sulkily she must leave for San Francisco today. Plainly the man situation hadn't worked out for Aimee—Duke was gone and Cole wasn't interested; she glared at her little link sausages and Ginny gave Diane an amused look.

They lingered over breakfast, then Diane thanked Ginny, told Aimee good-by, and was making her way across the lawn when Uncle Trench called to her. He'd come out onto the terrace in his wheelchair, a frail figure, and he'd forgotten the night before.

"Come here, little Missy, and talk to me. I see you over there, moving around in your house. See the other one too."

Diane felt her heart contract. "The—the other one?"

He bobbed his head. "Sure do," he said. "See her too. Plain as day. Plain as day. Dangerous place, Queenscourt. You ought to get out of it, you know. Live in a hotel. Live in the Westwind Hotel. You'll come to that, little Missy." He chuckled slyly. "If she lets you live long enough." He peered at her. "Pretty little thing. So like . . . I can't remember."

"Uncle Trench." Diane leaned forward. "If *who* lets me live long enough?"

But his face had gone vacant. "You play checkers, little Missy?" he demanded. "You know how to play checkers?"

She wanted to cry. Uncle Trench knew something, had seen something, but nothing stuck in his memory long enough to answer a question decently. But he had seen . . . the other one. *The other one*. Cold ran along her spine. And he'd added, "If *she* lets you live long enough."

Across the hedge she heard the TV truck in the drive.

"I have to go now but I'll be back," she told Uncle Trench and hurried over, reaching the front door just as a red-faced cheery giant rang the bell.

Three times she was interrupted by phone calls which she took in the library. The first was a wrong number. The next two were obscene.

Under tension from the calls, she ran upstairs for an aspirin, located the aspirin bottle in the bathroom, popped a tablet into her mouth—and realized that it didn't taste right. In sudden terror she spat it out, turned the bottle upside down and washed all the tablets down the drain, and leaning against the white marble sink burst into tears.

Then she washed her face and stared at the white-faced woman in the mirror. She was afraid . . . afraid.

When she went downstairs, feeling numb, the repairman was standing in the hall.

"It's lunchtime," he said. "Reckon I'll knock off for half an hour."

She knew he was angling for her to offer him lunch and she might have, but just then the phone rang and as she ran to the library she heard the front door close.

"Hello," she almost shouted into the phone.

"Diane," said Hilde, "have you seen the morning Courier?"

"Not yet," said Diane. "Duke's been buying it off the stands. I haven't subscribed yet." She hoped Hilde wouldn't guess the reason.

"Well, there's a picture in it." Hilde hesitated. "Cole's here. He says he'll bring it down."

Diane hung up, pushed back her hair from her damp forehead, and went to the front doors, flung them both open, was drinking in gulps of fresh summer air when Cole arrived.

"Hello, Diane," he said. "You're looking well." His glance took in her pale blue broadcloth shirt-dress, open at the neck, with flat pearl buttons. "Hilde wanted me to bring you this. Seemed to think there was some urgency about it. Can't imagine why."

He thrust a copy of the daily paper, the MacQueensport Courier, into her hand. It was folded at a page of pictures headed "FAIR'S FAIR," showing photos of various events from calf-judging to climbing a greased pole, and in the center, laconically captioned "SEEN AT THE FAIR," was a picture of Diane's face at kissing distance from Cole's, with

the crowd cropped away so that they seemed alone in the world.

Diane frowned. "I see what Hilde meant. It looks—cozy. Come in and sit down, Cole."

"Could have been anyone's picture," he shrugged. "Just happened to be ours."

"I suppose so," she said, harassed. "Anyway I've got worse things to worry about than newspaper pictures. I went upstairs to take an aspirin and—" she looked at him with fear in her eyes—"it didn't taste right."

Cole stared at her. "You think it was—something else?"

Miserably, Diane studied her hands.

He took a deep breath. "I think someone *is* trying to kill you, Diane," he said quietly. "And I think that someone is Lorna."

"No!" Her shoulders moved spasmodically in rejection of the idea. "Such things aren't possible, Cole!"

He turned away, stared out the window into the distance, perhaps back across the years for all she knew. "Anything was possible with Lorna," he said softly. "She made her own law."

"You ... loved her?" she whispered, with sudden knowledge.

He nodded. "I loved her, but I could see her as she was. See her faults. She wasn't perfect, Diane, but she was ... wonderful."

"And terrible ... if you think she's returned from the dead to kill me."

"That too. Only I don't think she returned. She never left. And it isn't *specifically* you. "It's—"

"It's just any woman who tries to occupy her house," said Diane unhappily.

"That's about it," said Cole grimly. "I remember Lorna always said no other woman would ever live at Queenscourt. I remember Ginny scoffing and saying 'You mean over your dead body?' And Lorna said, '*Not even then.*' She said Queenscourt was hers and no other woman could ever have it."

"I won't believe it," said Diane, clenching her fists. "I won't!"

"Suit yourself." He shrugged. "You're taking a long chance by living here but it's your—" He hesitated.

"It's my funeral," said Diane bitterly. "Go on—say it!"

His expression saddened. "You're determined to stay, aren't you? Even if you die for it?"

"Yes," flashed Diane. "I'm staying. No matter what!"

"Then I'll leave you to enjoy your house," said Cole stiffly, and stalked out.

The house seemed very empty without him.

The repairman came back shortly and finished fixing the TV. Diane saw him out. She found reasons not to go back into the house, puttered around in the yard, and it was with relief that she saw Hilde's green station wagon pull up in the drive.

"Hi, there." Hilde got out. "Did Cole give you the clipping, Diane?"

"Yes," said Diane. "Come in, Hilde."

"The Courier is owned by the Franklyn interests," Hilde told her bluntly. "Emmeline Franklyn's nephew runs it, but she controls. Of course," she went on, as if talking to herself, "I suppose the photographer just saw a couple of newsworthy faces in a crowd of nobodies and singled you out for a shot. Still—" she looked Diane directly in the face—"I'm only saying this as a friend, Diane, but it could be somebody trying to make trouble. Duke was known to be a jealous husband when he was married to Lorna."

"She certainly gave him plenty of reason."

"Yes, that's so," said Hilde.

"It was only a County Fair, Hilde. Bright sunlight and hordes of people. Duke wouldn't expect me to stay cooped up here!"

"I know, but what worries me is if Emmeline's nephew let the Courier do this—well, it might be something worse next time."

"Worse?"

"Oh, maybe I'm just imagining things." She trailed Diane to the big stainless steel kitchen. "Twenty servants wouldn't be too many in this mausoleum," she muttered, "and here you are going it alone." She looked out the window. "Such a lovely day and Ben moping inside."

Diane poured coffee into frail china cups that looked out of place on the kitchen table. She had just remembered something.

"There was a book in Lorna's desk," she told Hilde. "It's

either disappeared or I've misplaced it. But it was a kind of appointment book and it had a lot of men's names scrawled in it. As if those names were—well, her current interest. Is that possible, I mean, would she make a *record* of something like that?"

"With Lorna anything's possible," said Hilde, and Diane shivered. *Cole had said that too.* Hilde's face twisted. "Was Ben's name among them?"

Diane hesitated. She'd forgotten Ben's name was there. It troubled her to admit it to Hilde.

"Never mind, I know it was." Hilde's voice roughened with feeling. "She really *tried* to get Ben. Now ask yourself why? Just because, like Mt. Everest, he was *there*? No, she had her own husband, she had lovers—what did she want with Ben? Well, I'll tell you. She wanted to show me she could just casually reach out and take my husband if she wanted him and then toss him back."

Diane was afraid to ask, *And did she?* But Hilde answered the unspoken question. "When things got too thick, I took Ben away," she said. "We took a nice long trip to South America. Lorna was involved with someone else when we got back. But as to whether he'd have succumbed if we'd stayed, I'll never know." She set down her cup with a rattle that made Diane wince. "I *hated* Lorna," she said intensely. "I'm glad she's dead. It should have happened sooner."

Diane blinked. She had never heard Hilde outspokenly condemn anyone, had never seen hatred burn in those hazel eyes.

"She'd have wrecked my home," muttered Hilde, "if she could, damn her."

Hilde, the complacent mother cat, thought Diane with a rush of sympathy, happy with her pretty kitten daughters and her very own tomcat—Ben. But just try to invade her territory. Then you'd find a clawing yowling different sort of feline. She felt a great wave of affection toward Hilde.

"I'm glad she didn't get him, Hilde," she said warmly.

Hilde flashed a smile at her, her good humor restored. "I'm glad too," she said. "Then *I'd* have had to kill her instead of—" She flushed uncomfortably and Diane thought, *Never mind, you're completely transparent, I know what you think. You think Duke killed Lorna—but you think she deserved killing, that he had good and sufficient reason.* Somehow it

wasn't as bad for Hilde to think that, believing it justified, as for other people to think it, believing it unjustified.

She sat sipping her coffee and Hilde said impatiently, "Stop woolgathering, Diane. I really stopped by to tell you that you should find some excuse to call on Emmeline Franklyn. See how the wind blows."

Diane meditated. "Well, she was here collecting clothes for the Forward Looking House to be picked up on Saturday."

"There's your excuse," said Hilde. "Take them to her, say you won't be home Saturday. She'll have to ask you in, and from the tone of things, you'll know. Emmeline Franklyn is the most powerful woman in MacQueensport. If she okays you, you're *in*, but if she decides to ride you out on a rail, well. . . ."

"What are you trying to tell me, Hilde?"

"That Emmeline *hates* Cole. She's always goaded and patronized him—couldn't forgive him for not following in his father's footsteps, on to glory as head of Vair Iron Works. And about two weeks ago she walked into the Club and Cole was plastered and singing:

'Lil ole Emmy Sto-fer
Sleeps with her sho-fer!'

Emmeline was a Stouffer before she married Latham Franklyn. Well, Emmeline was *livid*. She barged out of there. She's strait-laced, she's vindictive, and everyone knows she's out to get Cole. She may be using you to get to him, figuring if she stirs up enough smoke, Duke will flatten Cole for her."

"But where would she hear gossip about Cole and me?"

Hilde looked embarrassed. "Well . . . there's Kitty. She goes to see Emmeline regularly. And you and Cole have been seen around. . . ."

"And she could use the Courier—"

"And other things. She could try to destroy *you* as a way to get at Cole. Duke's in for a proxy fight and Garson Smelters, who controls that big bloc of southern stock, always stays at Emmeline's for a day or two before the meeting. They put their heads together and generally vote the same way."

Oh, Duke, thought Diane in panic, I've ruined you. Emmeline Franklyn thinks I'm having an affair with Cole and so she's going to wash us all down the same drain!

"I'll go over and see her right now," she said, jumping up.

"Good, I'll help you load the stuff in the car. Emmeline's house is on the corner of Sycamore and Beech. Turn right on Sycamore. It's a big Victorian house with a yellow brick wall running all around it. Let me know how it turns out."

"I will." With the big box of clothes in the trunk, Diane waved and followed Hilde's station wagon out of the drive, drove toward MacQueensport. It was pleasant driving with the windows open through the sultry afternoon. A bumble bee buzzed into her window when she stopped for a traffic light and buzzed out again. Daylilies glowed in bright orange clumps by the roadside, and blue and yellow wildflowers dusted the fields.

She turned right on Sycamore and found herself in a lovely old part of town, with big homes, mostly red brick or sprawling white frame, some ivy-covered, sitting well back on manicured lawns shaded by big trees and dotted with clipped shrubbery. Farther down, the area became ever more affluent, with walls and tall hedges and lofty homes set even farther back down shaded driveways. She had no trouble finding Emmeline's house.

A high yellow brick wall with diamond cutouts through which could be glimpsed clipped boxwood shrubbery rose up on her right. The wall seemed to encompass the whole block and Diane swung the car through tall gas-lit brick gateposts around a paved circular drive lined with bursts of red lilies alternating with boxwood and backed by a screen of tall slender cypresses, and brought the car to a halt before Emmeline Franklyn's chaste front door.

She sat there for a minute, getting up the courage to go in. The house was old and, like its elderly owner, formidable. It rose three full stories with slate roofs and a mansard tower sticking up to make a fourth story at each end. From a shady side portico a handsome wolfhound got up, stretched and moved lazily toward her.

The ghost dog . . . she thought suddenly . . . the wolfhound Cole saw. So Emmeline Franklyn had one. But this was miles from Queenscourt . . . Still, she might just ask Emmeline if her dog had been lost a few days ago.

She got out of the car carefully, in case the dog should take offense. Instead it ambled toward her in friendly fashion.

She stroked the sleek head. "Good boy," she said, and rang the bell.

A little maid dressed in black with a white apron and collar opened the door.

"I'm Mrs. Tarrant," said Diane. "Is Mrs. Franklyn in?"

The maid hesitated. "Won't you come in, please?" She led Diane over Chinese rugs down a dark cherry-paneled hall into a big room that overlooked a handsome formal garden. Light flowed into it from two great bay windows. The room was painted pale cream and was dominated by a black marble fireplace and a large dark red oriental rug.

Diane looked around her at the pair of identical high-backed carved Victorian sofas that faced each other, the rosewood chairs with needlepoint upholstery. A number of black marble-topped tables supported pictures in silver frames that reminded one by the hair styles and short skirts that Emmeline was of the vintage of the nineteen-twenties. One of the photos—with features vaguely like Emmeline's—showed a woman in spangles and a very short skirt. Diane tried to tell herself that was Emmeline in her youth and failed.

Across the room in a rococo frame was an enlargement of a woman's face, artistically blurry and with plucked eyebrows, under a big hat. Diane peered at it. She thought she had seen that face before. Was it the hat? Hilde's album?

She was studying it so intently she jumped as the maid came in to say Mrs. Franklyn was resting. "It's her arthritis," she explained and Diane remembered Emmeline walked with a cane. "She asks to be excused."

Diane rose. "I just stopped by to deliver some clothes for the Forward Looking House."

"I'll get Barnaby to carry them in." The maid disappeared.

Diane watched her go with a feeling of frustration. She walked to the window and looked out at the garden. And caught her breath.

Just disappearing around the corner of the house was a woman in a wide-brimmed straw hat and gardening gloves. She leaned ever so lightly upon a cane. Although the woman was in her field of vision only for an instant, it was unmistakably Emmeline Franklyn.

Diane's cheeks pinked. She had her answer. Emmeline Franklyn was out to get her.

Chapter 26

She marched to the front door, watched stoically as gray-haired Barnaby with impeccable dignity shouldered the big box and carried it inside. Then she started the car with a jolt and tore out of the drive with a screech of tires. Damn Emeline Franklyn, *damn them all!*

The heat beat down on her. She was suffocating. She turned on the car's air conditioning. It did not respond. One more thing to have fixed, she thought savagely. One more gadget demanding that money be spent on it! Money they didn't have!

Sweltering, she stopped at a drive-in restaurant and ordered a strawberry milk shake. Cooled, she drove home more slowly under the sun's now slanting rays. She made the cloverleaf turn and began watching for the tall chimneys of Queenscourt to appear. Now she saw them, the slanted slate roofs, the small attic windows appearing when there was a break in the trees. She almost lost control of the car. There was a light shining in the attic windows. Then the thick growth of foliage again hid the house from view, and Diane drove into the curving driveway leaning forward peering up at the attic. The windows were now dark, and she realized that in making the turn at that angle the evening sun had flashed on them, making them seem lighted.

She told herself that had to be it. And leaned on the steering wheel and burst into tears.

She didn't know how long she sat there, but the heat in the car finally forced her out. She got up tiredly and went in through the cavernous dark hall and washed her face in the first floor powder room, looked at her frightened reflection through wet lashes and knew she was going to have to tell him. As she came out the phone rang and her heart nearly stopped. A blast of late afternoon sunlight nearly blinded her,

and she saw that Duke was silhouetted against the open hall door. He came in, slamming it behind him. "I'll get it, Diane." He strode into the library.

She heard him say, "Say that in person and I'll break your neck!" and slam the receiver down.

"Why?" she cried. "Why are they calling? What do they want?"

"They're irritated," he said, loosening his tie. "Whew, but it was hot in Cleveland."

"Were you successful?"

"Don't know yet." He walked ahead of her into the hall, took a short black automatic from his pocket, laid it on a rosewood table. "Remind me to put that in the glove compartment when we leave the house," he said.

Diane stared at it. It looked very formidable.

"I didn't know you had a gun," she said. "Where did you get it?"

He gave a short laugh. "Sam Wadleigh, our friendly neighborhood Sheriff, insisted I carry it. Cobbie's been getting phone calls too, some of them threats on my life. It was either carry the gun or have two strong men follow me everywhere I went. I chose the gun."

"Threats on your life?" Diane's throat felt dry.

His voice was ironic. "Oh, Sam's worry that someone might snuff me out doesn't spring from any affection for me. He just explained that my enemies were so numerous that should I be gunned down, he'd have to use his whole force checking on likely suspects and he couldn't spare the men. Sam's a plain speaker." He ran a hand through his hair. "Sam could be right. Someone tried to run me down with a car today in the parking lot at the airport. I tried to catch him but Cobbie's car wasn't up to it." He cast a longing look at the closed front door, behind which was a car that *would* have been up to it.

Diane leaned against the wall for support. "But why, Duke," she cried, "when you aren't even in control of the company?"

"In the world's eyes, I *am* Tarrant Steel, Diane," said Duke in a cold voice. "Whether I'm presently in control or not. I put it together. My name is associated with it. I'm still the major stockholder even though I don't own a controlling interest. People assume that what is done there is done at my

command or at the very least in my interest. There's no ducking it. I'm *the man at Tarrant Steel* in the public's eyes."

The Steel Duke, she thought uneasily. He tore off his coat and flung it down on a chair. His head was high. Something about him evoked a man in armor, bearing invincibly down. Staring at Duke now, she could see him—just as she had in Nassau at the top of the Queen's Staircase—as the lineal descendant of those legendary warriors who had swung their three-foot broadswords from sun to sun. This was the way others saw him too—a man to be reckoned with. If he fell, the others would buckle. He was the citadel, the fortress. The shadow of his leadership hung over them now, making him a natural target.

She couldn't tell him now about lights in windows and pills that weren't aspirin.

"You look tired," she said. "I'll get you some coffee."

"Never mind," he said. "What's the word on the strike? Cobbie's car radio's gone bad."

"I haven't heard," said Diane. "The repairman didn't get the TV fixed until afternoon and I went out." She didn't say she'd been to see Emmeline Franklyn; that was one piece of news he didn't need to have heaped on him right now.

The phone rang again.

Duke marched into the library. "Go to hell," she heard him roar, and winced at his expression as he came out. "Tomorrow," he said grimly, "you are going to have a maid. I'm not leaving you out here alone any longer."

"But Duke, maids are hard to find—"

"I'll find one through Cobbie," he said grimly. "You can count on it. And she'll be here tomorrow."

She knew she ought to protest but she was weak with relief at the idea of having someone in the house.

"I've got to change clothes and get back downtown," he said, as she followed him upstairs. "I'll drop you off at the Club. Stay there till I get back."

"Don't you want some dinner first?"

"I'll get a bite downtown. You eat at the Club, Diane. Do you good. You look a little pale." He stared at her. "Have you been crying?"

"I got something in my eye," she said defensively. "I was driving with the car windows open."

She wasn't sure whether he believed her or not, but she

changed hurriedly to an off-white silk jersey, silver-belted, and a silver band around her hair.

"You look fine," he approved her, and—ridiculously—her spirits shot up.

I was born to love him, she thought gloomily, watching him pocket the gun from the hall table. *But was I also born to lose him?*

She was subdued as he dropped her off at the Club. "Don't look so worried," he said. "I've been in hard fights before. Things will work out."

But suppose . . . suppose they didn't? She lifted her chin and tried to return his gaze as clear-eyed and courageously as she could. He bent down and kissed her lips, a quick kiss and was gone. She watched the long white car disappear around a clump of trees, and went into the Club.

All the talk there was about the strike. From a swirl of strident voices she got the impression that this unauthorized walkout at the Foundry was born of fierce resentment whipped up carefully by a small group. There had been trouble at the big Tarrant Steel plant today too. A few men had formed a picket line at the main entrance in sympathy with the wildcat strike at the Foundry. The rest, returning from lunch, had milled around inconclusively, arguing that was a wildcat strike, unauthorized. Some, irritated, finally forced their way through and fighting had broken out.

Diane noted her company was not in hot demand, and wondered why. She strolled through groups that seemed not to see her, or who nodded and turned talking animatedly, to friends. She took her drink and moved out to the verandah, found a chair in the dusk. A light breeze had come up and fanned her hot face. *Steel town politics. . . .* She wished she were anywhere else. No, not quite anywhere. She didn't wish herself back at Queenscourt.

Walking in, she ran into Kitty.

"Diane, what a pretty dress." Kitty preened a bit in her own mint-green skirt shot with silver threads and ice-green shell top.

To keep her from asking about the strike, Diane said idly, "Are you going to the masquerade ball, Kitty?"

"Oh, Todd and I never miss it. Although I can never think of anything very inspired to wear. Francie's the original one.

Once she went as an Amazon, complete with spear and leopard skins!"

Diane could imagine Francie with her tawny hair and her golden eyes and that leonine walk strolling in with a spear. Impressive she must have been.

"Francie won't tell me what she's going to wear this year," said Kitty. "But she went up to Cleveland to buy it."

"Cleveland?" said Diane weakly.

"Yes, she flew up yesterday, got back today. I ran across her at the airport. I was seeing my mother-in-law off. Duke was there too. . . ."

Diane turned away and closed her eyes. Cleveland. Francie had gone to Cleveland yesterday. Flown up. Got back today. So had Duke. They had both been there overnight.

She got control of herself and turned back to Kitty. "What are you and Todd wearing?"

"Come as Carrie Nation with a hatchet and let Todd carry an empty keg of beer," said a voice over her shoulder and she turned to see Cole giving Kitty a challenging smile.

"Well," said Kitty with a short little laugh, spiced with innuendo, "I didn't think you'd be far away."

"On second thought," he drawled, eyes narrowing, "wear something we'd all recognize you in. Say, a short fur coat?"

Kitty looked about to spit at him when Ginny's light high voice interposed. "Cole, you haven't been here ten minutes and already you're in trouble. Go fetch us all a drink, why don't you? How are you, Kitty?"

Kitty said rather stiffly she was fine and she didn't want a drink. Cole shrugged and left them, and after some small talk Kitty said she'd just leave before Cole returned, adding spitefully that he was like a low-grade virus, insignificant but unpleasant to have around. With that she drifted away.

"What's Kitty got against Cole?" demanded Diane blankly.

Ginny hesitated. "I suppose you may as well know. Several years ago Todd's health broke down. He was in several eastern hospitals. And while he was gone, Cole 'consoled' Kitty. When Todd came back, recovered, Cole dropped her. Kitty can't forgive him for deserting her."

Diane's head spun. "You mean Kitty and Cole—"

"Well, it wasn't anything serious—at least with Cole. But whenever Cole looks at a new girl, Kitty's claws come out."

She smiled blandly at the "new girl" and Diane blushed furiously, remembering the picture in the paper.

Before she could think of a response, Cole rejoined them and they had dinner together, with other people stopping by their table to say hello. But all through the evening Diane was unpleasantly aware of covert glances and craning necks.

She felt relief when Duke arrived, looking tall, purposeful, and able to handle whatever situation might arise. He said, "Ginny, you're looking lovely. Cole, how are you? Thanks for taking care of my bride for me."

Cole nodded and Duke refused a drink, saying lightly this strike thing was making him keep early hours, and Cole said with a twang in his voice, "Think you'll be able to quell it?" and Duke shrugged.

As they turned to go, Diane realized uncomfortably that every eye in the room was focused on the four of them, and after they left, she asked Duke, "Why were people staring at us?"

"Well, if they were hoping for word about the strike from me, I haven't got any," he said grimly.

She ached to ask him about Cleveland, but she knew what the answer would be. Coincidence. Francie happened to take the same plane, and happened to return on the same one. Which wasn't too surprising, since there weren't that many planes flying between MacQueensport and Cleveland. He'd explain it all away, she thought bitterly.

They heard the phone ringing even before they entered the house. Duke opened the door angrily, got his key stuck in the lock, and Diane plunged past him into the library and picked up the phone. At the stream of filth, she flung the instrument down. Duke came in, took one look at her, and looking as if he could hardly resist the urge to tear it from the wall, took it off the hook.

"Let them hear a busy signal for a change," he muttered.

They walked upstairs in silence and went into their separate rooms. A minute later Duke appeared, furious, in the connecting doorway, grasping Lorna's picture in its silver frame, with the glass broken over her challenging smile. "Is this your idea of a joke?" he asked savagely.

"It appeared there," said Diane. "I have no idea how it got there. I had packed it off to the attic with the rest of her things."

"Appeared?"

"Yes. Ginny and I found it last night when we came over to investigate the light."

"You and Ginny were prowling around here *last night*?"

"Well, she had Uncle Trench's gun," said Diane defensively.

He looked at her as if she had lost her senses, went over and tossed the offending picture into a drawer, slammed it shut, and turned back to her more mildly, "Had someone broken in?"

"We couldn't find any sign of it," admitted Diane. "A fuse had blown—I fixed it this morning—and one of the living room windows wasn't locked because Uncle Trench followed us over and was sitting in the living room in the dark when we came downstairs. He scared us."

"You and Ginny and Trencherton Westcott all wandering over here in the dark." He shook his head. "I thought you had better sense."

"Well, I couldn't have somebody stealing the silver, now could I?"

"That," he said with heavy irony, "is why we pay taxes. So people like Sam Wadleigh, the sheriff, will take that sort of activity off our shoulders. Ginny has princess phones in all colors all over the house. Why didn't you pick one up?"

"Because she talked me out of it," said Diane hotly. "She didn't see any light and she thought I imagined it."

"Very likely you did," said Duke, and Diane shouted, "No, I *didn't* imagine it!" and slammed the connecting door between them and threw herself on the bed crying noisily.

She heard the sound of his shower running, and after a while she turned out her light and saw that there was no light under his door. He had simply left her to her misery and gone to sleep. *Damn him*, she thought, *how can I love him so much?*

Chapter 27

The new maid arrived early in the morning. Her name was Noreen. A carrot-topped farm girl with a bright smile and a trusting look, she rushed about the house with young enthusiasm, singing little snatches of popular songs. Diane liked her at once. And best of all, she wasn't alone any more. She didn't have to turn and look carefully behind her. She had an ally, chosen by Cobbie: Noreen.

She was looking out her bedroom window, happily listening to the sounds of activity as Noreen cleaned Duke's room, when she saw Uncle Trench coming across the lawn in his wheelchair. He came to a halt below her window and she opened the window and stuck her head out.

"Marnie," he called sharply, "is that you? I see you walking around the house, you and that Garnet. Hear you whispering your secrets. I hear what you say out there under the trees. I lie there in my hammock and I can hear you over on the other side of the hedge whispering. Always whispering. . . ."

"Uncle Trench," she cried, "I'll be right down." Heavens, she thought, suppose he fell in the pool?

He was still talking when she reached him, plaintively. "Marnie? Garnet? Where have you gone?" He turned to Diane, his eyes dim, confused. "Gone. . . ." he looked up at Diane. "Who are you?" he asked, puzzled.

"I'm Diane. Duke's wife."

He shook his head. "Duke's wife is Lorna. Lorna MacQueen."

"Uncle Trench," she said, distressed, "let me wheel you back to Westwind."

For a moment he cringed away from her, then let himself be wheeled over docilely. At the terrace she met Ginny, coming out. An ethereal Ginny in a long skirt of a Japanese

design with a delicate shell-pink top. Her face went blank at the sight of Diane wheeling Trencherton Westcott toward her.

"I found him in my yard, sort of disoriented," explained Diane. "I was afraid he'd fall in the pool and drown."

Ginny caught her breath. "Wait till I get my hands on that Allerton woman," she said grimly. "Letting him wander around like this! He could have wandered out on the road and been run over!"

She stormed away and Diane returned to Queenscourt where she helped Noreen scrub up the party chairs. Then with Noreen inside cleaning and waxing, Diane found some fast drying gilt and decided to touch up the two worst chairs, they'd be dry by tomorrow night. She carried them onto the side lawn, set them on newspapers and carefully touched up their shabby legs, and straightened up smiling. This party was going to be a success!

Humming, she went inside and washed up, and in a capricious moment decided to clean out Lorna's desk in the library and have Noreen cart it all up to the attic. She carried in a carton box, filled it helter skelter from the drawers—the new Mrs. Tarrant would make her own way—and carted the box back to the kitchen where Noreen was splashing dish-water and singing off key.

"Noreen." She pulled the attic key from her pocket. "If you'd just carry this box up to the attic? And then join me in the front hall. There are some dead bulbs in the wall brackets and I'll need you to steady that rickety ladder."

Noreen dried her hands, smiled, swung up the box lightly and headed for the back stairs. Diane got the wooden step-ladder from the pantry and carried it to the front hall.

She had set up the rickety ladder and was already climbing it gingerly when she heard Noreen clattering down from the attic. "Oh, don't you climb that, Mrs. Tarrant, till I'm there to hold it!" cried Noreen from the upper landing, racing forward—and suddenly on the top steps her feet flew out from under her and with a wild yell she was airborne, tumbling down the stairs, ricochetting off the paneled wall to crash to the floor in the lower hall with one arm bent under her.

Transfixed, Diane dropped the light bulb she was holding. It sounded like a shot in the quiet hall. She almost fell off the ladder in her haste to reach Noreen.

"My arm—I think it's broke," gasped Noreen, wincing.

"Stay right there, don't move!" cried Diane, alarmed, and stumbled into the library to phone for an ambulance.

She'd have accompanied Noreen to the hospital, but the girl wouldn't hear of it, so she compromised by calling Noreen's mother. After assuring a tearful Noreen she'd hold her job for her, she watched the ambulance pull away with mixed feelings. The young girl had seemed so sure-footed. How could such a thing have happened?

She closed the front door and her somber gaze fell on the stairway. She walked toward the newel post, feeling for a moment it had been not Noreen's but Lorna's body sprawled on the floor. The whole house lived and breathed Lorna, and those who lived in it walked in her shadow. Diane had the horrible feeling that Lorna's ghost had lurked on the top step and hurled Noreen down the length of them.

One thing was certain: Feeling as she did, she was going to get out of this house. Go to Hilde's. Go anywhere. Duke had taken Cobbie's car, but the keys to Duke's car were in her purse upstairs in the bedroom.

She hesitated, then steeled herself and started up the stairs. It seemed a long way up and she walked with reluctance, her hand gripping the bannister fiercely.

That tight grip was all that saved her from falling for, when she reached the top steps, her feet went abruptly out from under her, as if she were skating on ice, but her hand sturdily held to the bannister so that she landed, gasping, on her knees, clutching at the stair spokes.

What—? She tried to get up and her feet flew out from under her again, her back coming up hard against the stair spokes. She reached down and felt the stair surface with her hand. Always brightly polished were these handsome uncarpeted stairs, their walnut grain showing rich in the soft light. But today the two top steps were covered with a film of wax or furniture polish so thick it almost formed a pool. They were slippery as bath oil. She hadn't told Noreen to wax the stairs, and certainly neither she nor Cammie had ever applied a glaze like this. And it was only on the two top steps. Her searching fingers told her that below those the surface was normal.

It came to her then like a thunderbolt, crashing through her head like an explosion: *This is how Lorna fell. She always hurried, everyone said she raced along. Impatient.*

Tense. She hit the top step and it was waxed like this, tried to make the second step and zoomed off into space—as Noreen had.

But while Noreen had only broken her arm, Lorna had had the bad luck to knock herself out on the sharp newel post and cut her wrist badly in the fall—probably trying to save herself—and had bled to death lying on the floor with Duke gone and all the servants away.

Duke gone and all the servants away.... The words screamed at her. Duke was gone now and so was their only servant, Noreen. Only ... no one but Cobbie knew they'd hired Noreen; and she had come so early, no one on Trowbridge Road would have been up to see her arrive.

So the wax on the top step had been meant for *her*. Noreen had stumbled into a trap laid for Diane.

Snatching the car keys, Diane made it down the back stairs and by the time she had reached the front door she had come to a decision.

She was going to drive into town and find Duke and tell him everything. Right now.

Driving in, she switched the car radio on. A news announcer was talking about trouble at the MacQueen Foundry. She couldn't make much sense out of it except that several men had been injured.

That's where he'll be, she thought grimly. *In the thick of it.* And headed down a road that led, she knew, to the Foundry's main gate.

There was a crowd of men there, milling around, and a number of uniformed policemen. She spotted Cobbie's car and looked for Duke. Someone bawled derisively, "The Steel Duchess is here. Make way for her, boys!" And Duke appeared, bearing down on her with the sun glinting on his shoulders, on his dark arrogant head, just as she had seen him in Nassau that first time, a solitary dominating figure.

She jumped out and ran to him.

"Diane." He gripped her shoulders. "What the hell are you doing here?"

She couldn't tell him now. Not here. "I wanted to see you. I—"

"Haven't you any brains?" he said between clenched teeth. "Clear out, this thing is turning ugly." He was propelling her back to the car, shoving her with an open hand. He pushed

her into the front seat, slammed the car door. "Todd's been hurt," he said grimly. "Go see Kitty. Go *now*, Diane."

She backed up with a scream of tires and from a distance watched Duke walk purposefully toward the milling crowd. He swaggered slightly and he walked alone, a strong man among other strong men. He was one of them, she marveled. Just as if he handled the big steel ingots himself. Steel was his life—and they knew it. He led them, but he was one of them too.

Some of them had bricks in their hands.

Duke vaulted to the top of a car with its hood up that had been spattered with red paint and stood there, silhouetted against the sun. He looked as long ago men like him *must* have looked standing atop the walls of Acre. Wild.

"You wanted to talk to me," he said in a ringing voice. "I'm here to listen—and to have my say."

Someone lifted a brick.

Diane turned away with a sob, swung the wheel and sped on down the street. *He can handle it*, she told her beating heart. *It's up to me to carry my end. Which at the moment is to comfort Kitty. Everything else can wait.*

To that end, she stopped at a florist's shop and bought an armload of red roses, and so laden turned into the drive of Kitty's long ultramodern rambler, walked across the wide terra cotta tile terrace and rang the bell.

Kitty herself opened the door. She didn't look pretty today. Her red hair swung lankly and her features were drawn and ugly. Her eyes narrowed as she saw Diane. "Did you know Todd was hurt in that flare-up at the Foundry today?" she demanded savagely. "Someone threw a brick and damn near killed him!"

"I heard," said Diane. "I'm so very sorry. I brought some flowers." She held them out awkwardly.

Kitty appeared not to see the flowers. She leaned forward and her voice pulsed. "None of this would have happened if Duke hadn't come back. Bringing all this upheaval! Upsetting everybody. What kind of wife are you? You do nothing to stop it! And now Todd—" She looked about to cry.

"But how could I stop anything?" cried Diane.

"*I'll tell you*," said Kitty wildly. "You can go back to Virginia or wherever you came from. And maybe Duke will follow you and all this trouble will go with him. *Why are you*

staying? Lorna won't let you have the house and Francie won't let you have the man!"

Diane's hand on the flowers went limp. She backed away a step, unaware that her face had gone white.

"Don't look so shocked," rasped Kitty. "I'm only telling you what everyone else knows already. Oh, don't stand there looking like that! Don't tell me you don't know who stirred up the trouble at the Foundry?"

"Who?" Diane heard her voice say.

"Francie, of course." Kitty's mouth formed a malicious smile. "But she'll straighten it out—when she gets Duke."

Diane dropped the roses from numb fingers on the terra cotta tiles, where they sprawled in bright profusion. She stared at Kitty for a long time. Then she turned on her heel and walked away. Behind her she heard a door slam viciously.

But it was true, she thought miserably as she climbed back into the long white car. *Her living rival was as dangerous as her dead one.*

She felt a sudden desperate need to talk to another woman. Someone wise and reassuring. Hilde.

She drove past Queenscourt to The Elms, passed what she assumed to be Hilde's green station wagon in the drive and was about to ring the bell when the door opened and Clayton came out carrying a basket and shears. "Miss Hilde's in the sun room," he said, holding the door for her.

Her footsteps soundless on the soft carpeting, she made for the sunroom. As she reached it, she saw Hilde and Frieda Payne, both with their backs to her, talking earnestly. Diane bit her lip. Hilde she could confide in, but Frieda. . . .

". . . and Archer doesn't know what to do, and we wanted to know if you and Ben—" Frieda was saying, when something alerted her to Diane's presence and she whirled around looking frightened.

Hilde, always composed, said, "Hello, Diane," and then to Frieda in an offhand way, "Well, maybe we can manage to come, but you know Ben hasn't been very well. . . . Could I call you?"

And Frieda said too quickly in a voice filled with relief, "Oh, yes, do call."

Watching them, listening to the sound of relief in Frieda's voice, Diane knew that wasn't what they'd been talking about

at all, and remembered suddenly that clot of women lunching with Francie at the tearoom. Frieda had been among them. Perhaps Kitty was right and Francie was stirring up trouble.

"Coffee?" asked Hilde companionably. She bent over the long fruitwood coffee table and poured another cup, handed it to Diane, who sat down facing them.

Frieda watched her uneasily. As if on inspiration, she said rather too loudly, "Hilde, I almost forgot. You know those bones they discovered in the lake alongside the Huntsberry Road? Well, they've identified them and guess who it was?"

"No one we know, I hope."

"At first, they only had a jawbone and some teeth—but then they found a watch."

Hilde grimaced. Diane leaned forward, feeling frightened. She was facing Hilde and Frieda and the open door behind them, and now she realized that Ben was framed in that door, listening intently.

"And then the dentist identified the teeth—and it was *your maid*, Hilde, that Mattie Sue Lingerly."

"Oh, no," cried Hilde, distressed. "Not little Mattie Sue!"

Diane was looking directly at Ben, though the others could not see him. She saw his stricken face as Frieda made her pronouncement. His face turned ashen and he staggered. For a wild moment Diane thought he was having a heart attack. Then he lurched away from the doorway. She sat there stunned. Her coffee spilled in her lap.

"Excuse me, Hilde. I want to wash this out before it stains." She ran from the room, hearing Hilde's "I can't believe it!" echo behind her. Ahead of her she heard a door close. A door to the outside world, she guessed. She ran to a door that opened onto the garden, saw Ben moving unsteadily down the garden walk, head bent.

She ran after him, caught him at the end of the garden beside a clump of lemon lilies, where he had stopped to lean heavily against a tree.

"Ben," she said. "You gave Mattie Sue the watch, didn't you? You must tell me, Ben, I have to know."

He nodded dumbly.

Then Mattie Sue's story was true, it was true!

He swung around. She had never seen a man's face so ravaged. "I loved her, Diane. She worked in our house, and she became more dear to me—" He stopped. "You mustn't tell

Hilde," he said gravely. "You must never tell Hilde. That's why Mattie Sue wouldn't testify, that's why she left. She loved me, but she loved Hilde too. Said Hilde had been like a mother to her, said she couldn't wreck Hilde's life."

Poor Mattie Sue, thought Diane, caught between the wreckage of two worlds.

"We agreed she must go away. Another State. I bought her a bus ticket to Chicago. I've a sister there. I thought I could use that as an excuse to go there and see her sometimes. But she couldn't bring herself to go. She hid out with her Aunt June—Cammie's sister—out on the Huntsberry Road. I was to meet her up at the lake the next night and take her to the bus." He turned away and a spasm of pain wracked his body as he stared through the trees in the direction of the Extension where Mattie Sue had lived her short and reckless life. Diane thought he might be remembering another young girl who had left him long ago. And confusing the first lost love with the second. Her heart ached for him. And even more for Hilde, whose life would be smashed beyond repair if she found out.

"I met her that night," he said. "I wanted her to come and get on the bus but she wouldn't. She had her suitcase with her but she changed her mind. We walked along the lake and—I don't know if you've seen it, but there's an old rotting pier there. Mattie Sue walked out on it, swinging along. I warned her to be careful, the boards were rotten, but she only shrugged and said bitterly she didn't care, what did she have to live for anyway, I was sending her away. . . . And I sat down on the bank and watched her. She was so pretty . . . so young. I was very upset, I didn't know what to do. And all of a sudden she slipped and I heard her scream and I ran forward but she'd fallen off the end of the pier. Diane, she sank like a rock. It was a dark night and I jumped into the water and thrashed around, but I couldn't find her. I must have searched for an hour. I was exhausted. Then I climbed up on the bank and called her name, thinking she'd gotten out and was waiting there, wanting to scare me. But she didn't answer and I thought how her long hair must have tangled in the weeds that choked the lake and held her there till she drowned. I was sure then she was dead. I got her suitcase and put it in my car and the next day I drove over to a dump past Vairstown and tossed it in myself. It was one of

those landfill things, they've closed it now, bulldozed it over. And all this year I've been waiting, telling myself maybe she isn't dead, she'll come back one day and say she ran away to teach me a lesson. . . ." A sob caught in his throat and Diane realized the tension he'd been under, waiting, waiting. . . .

He said thickly, "Her family knew she was going with a married man, but she let them think it was Duke—to protect *me*, so Hilde would never find out." Diane's eyes widened. "I told Duke about the watch. Mattie Sue was his alibi. He said to forget it, they'd never hang Lorna's death on him. Why should he kill her? She wasn't any more or less faithful to him on that day than any other, was she?"

But maybe it hit him harder that day. Maybe that was the day the dam broke. The little teeth of doubt were there again, chewing at the fabric of what she wanted so desperately to believe.

"And now, if I tell them the truth at this late date, they'll think I killed her. A married man who got rid of a girl he didn't want by pushing her in the water one dark night. They'd never know how much I loved her, how much I *miss* her. And, oh, God, what it would do to Hilde!" He rocked with misery, leaning against the rough bark of the tree, his face in his hands. "Hilde mustn't know." The words were wrenched out of him. "It would kill her."

He began to cry, sobs deep in his throat, and leaned against the tree, wracked with anguish. Diane had never seen a grown man cry before. She fled. Back to the living room, forgetting the coffee stain.

"Ben will be upset," Hilde was saying as she entered. "He liked her too."

Diane thought that was the understatement of the year.

"I really must be going." Frieda rose uneasily. "No, I'll see myself out." She paused. "Don't forget to call me." She almost bumped into Cole, coming in with his arms full of flowers. "I told Clayton I'd bring these in," he said. "He's cutting more. Where do you want them?"

"Oh, he's cutting too many." Hilde jumped up. "Just lay them down anywhere. Pour Cole some coffee, Diane. I'll run out and stop him."

Using that as an excuse to overtake Frieda and have that discussion I mustn't overhear, thought Diane. She felt very depressed.

Cole set down the flowers. "You're looking glum," he remarked.

She sighed. "They've just identified those bones on the Huntsberry Road as Mattie Sue Lingerly, that girl who used to work for Hilde. She's very upset."

"Oh, is that all?" he said lightly. "Radio's full of it."

She paused in pouring the coffee. "Is that *all*? A young girl's bones are found bleaching and you—"

His voice hardened. "Personally I don't care *who* did in Mattie Sue Lingerly. Or any of the rest of that trash down at the Extension."

"Why do you hate them so?" she asked wonderingly.

"Because one of the 'ladies' from the Extension—one of Latham Franklyn's cast-offs to be exact—blackmailed my father to the day he died. She moved to St. Louis where the checks he sent kept her in style. He knew it would break my mother's heart if she ever found out about his lapse with the upstairs maid. My mother loved him passionately. A fact he forgot in the heat of the moment."

"But that was only one person, Cole," protested Diane. "Surely you can't condemn them all for that."

"Can't I? The others would have done the same, they just didn't happen to have her heaven-sent opportunity to louse up our lives. And my father was a weakling, he didn't have the guts to shut her mouth permanently. I would have! But he sent me away to school so my 'hot head' would cool. I never respected my father after that, knuckling under to a woman, so I refused to follow in his footsteps, wouldn't help him in his proxy fight with Duke. I had lots of stock then, left me by my grandfather. I voted it against my father and for Duke. Made a mistake there—it cost me Lorna. She loved a winner and I didn't realize that soon enough. That was when she decided to marry Duke, the day he won that proxy fight."

And now he was into another proxy fight.

She stared at Cole, beginning to understand him a little. A wild sensitive boy who had loved his father, worshipped his mother, and been shocked that his father couldn't handle a situation that to his youthful eyes seemed straightforward and simple. So he had turned his back on his father and crawled into a bottle.

She leaned forward, feeling that in his present confessional mood he'd tell her almost anything. "Cole," she said in-

tensely, "did Lorna kill Garnet? Did she run her down on the road and leave her there to die?"

"Of course not," he said, amazed. "Who told you that?"

"Ginny," she said.

"Ginny knows nothing about it," he said sharply. "Lorna had slipped out of the house early that morning and we'd been having a private swim in the Club lake. Coming back I was following Lorna's car down the road toward Trowbridge. I lost sight of her—she drove faster than I did—and when I reached the turn she had stopped her car and was standing in the road staring down at Garnet's body. I jumped out and she looked up and said, 'Someone's run over her. Someone's killed Garnet!' I shook her and told her people would think she'd done it, to rush home and pile into bed and let someone 'wake' her and tell her about Garnet's accident. She jumped into her car and drove home and I went back to the Club and played a couple of sets of tennis."

"But . . . maybe she did it. And stopped and backed up to see what she'd done. Maybe she killed Garnet in a blind rage."

"Not a chance," said Cole. "She collapsed in my arms. It was the only time I'd ever seen Lorna weep."

"Why? If she hated Garnet so?"

"She was weeping," he said grimly, "because someone else had gotten Garnet first, when *she'd* meant to do it. *They weren't tears of grief, they were tears of rage.*"

Diane stared at him. Lorna hadn't killed. But she'd *wanted* to. Desperately. And this was the unfulfilled woman who stalked the dark halls of Queenscourt. What created a ghost anyway? Not those fitful shadows of gray ladies who minced down corridors they'd known in life, evaporating if people looked at them, but the spirit of a rage so deep, so violent it survived even . . . death? A cold feeling crept over her. Perhaps in death that violence became . . . less selective . . . and was vented not on the object of its hatred but on those it . . . could . . . reach.

Still bruised by his words, and dabbing ineffectually at the coffee stain, she felt she had had more than her share of revelations when Hilde returned and Cole, his face now a thundercloud, said he couldn't stay, he only wanted to speak to Ben and Hilde said vaguely Ben was around somewhere, try the garden.

With Cole gone, Hilde turned to Diane. "You're wondering why Frieda cut off so abruptly when you came in." She held out a newspaper clipping. "She wanted to know if I'd seen this. And whether she should tell you about it."

And something else too, divined Diane, *something you're not saying*. She took the clipping.

"From the Courier," said Hilde ironically, and Diane read:

"What lovely bride whose last name begins with T is giving her husband a merry chase these days with what prominent local bachelor whose last name begins with V? The question is, Mr. T is known to have a short temper. What will happen when T catches up with V?"

Aghast, Diane stared at the column. "Oh, but they couldn't mean me!" Her voice sank to a whisper. "Suppose Duke sees this?"

Hilde shrugged. "According to Lorna, Duke never read the gossip columns. Her name appeared in them regularly—though not, as I recall, in the Courier's."

And now his second wife's name was in them. Diane flushed with shame—and then indignation took over. "I don't deserve this," she flashed. "There's nothing between Cole and me."

"Don't tell *me*," Hilde gave her a slanted look. "Tell it to the press."

All this spite. . . .

"Emmeline Franklyn wouldn't see me, Hilde." Diane bit her lips. And then, because she had to confide in someone, she rushed on. "Duke got me a maid. Over my protest. She started work this morning."

"Well, that's a relief. I told Duke you shouldn't be rattling around there alone."

"She fell down the main staircase and broke her arm—and the *reason* she fell, Hilde, was that somebody had waxed the two top steps like *glass*. I couldn't stand up on them!"

"You mean—" Hilde's voice rose angrily—"someone got in and did that? Oh, that's terrible. Come on, I want to see it for myself. Cole told me about the wire across the bridal path and I thought it might have been some youngsters playing an ugly prank—we have some bad ones around here. But if people are getting into the *houses*—"

As she talked, she propelled Diane energetically outside, pushed her into the green station wagon that was so like

Frieda's, skidded out of the driveway and roared down to Queenscourt. Hilde in full dudgeon was a person to be reckoned with. She seemed twice as big when she was angry, and she was seething with indignation.

Diane didn't really want to go back into the house, but with Hilde's big frame leading the way, she had no choice.

"Now where was it? Those two top steps?" Hilde reached the landing, bent down to touch the surface of the steps. "Where did you say, Diane?"

"You're standing on them," Diane said sharply from below her. "Be careful you don't break your neck."

"Where is it?" Hilde sounded perplexed. "Was it some special spot?"

"No, all across both steps. You mean—" Diane's eyes widened and she raced up to join Hilde, arrived breathless at the top and knelt down, her hands joining Hilde's in a searching quest of the smooth surface.

She stood up, leaning on the bannister for support. "It's been removed," she said hoarsely. "Can't you see, Hilde, while I've been gone someone *removed* it!"

Hilde was looking at her strangely.

"Hilde . . . you do believe me?"

Hilde looked around her wildly. "Of course, I believe you, Diane, but—it just seems so crazy, somebody waxing the steps and then cleaning the wax off, all so your new maid would fall downstairs."

"Not my new maid, Hilde—so *I* would fall downstairs. So I would go the same way Lorna did!"

Hilde seemed to rock on her feet. "Diane," she said firmly, "if you don't tell Duke about this, *I will*."

Diane saw where this route was taking her. It would be difficult to stop Hilde, even now. And Duke, with his money troubles—and now that she'd seen the crisis at the Foundry—might break under this added burden. She closed her eyes. "I must have been mistaken," she said dully. "It seemed very slippery but . . . all those nasty phone calls, they've upset me."

Hilde sighed. "Come to the supermarket with me, Diane. I can't leave you *here*."

"You're a godsend," said Diane gratefully. "I have last-minute stuff to get for the party."

At the supermarket's checkout counter, Hilde nudged her.

"See that forceful looking man over there with the shock of white hair, in the health food section? That's Garson Smelters."

Diane studied him across the room. So this was Garson Smelters, the key to everything.

"What's he like?" she asked Hilde.

"Soft-spoken but hard-headed. Want to meet him?"

"Not now," said Diane, harassed.

Hilde helped her unload her groceries, drove her back to The Elms where Diane retrieved her car. Diane looked back as she drove away. Good, competent, deserving Hilde, whose happiness was a fragile thing that an inscription on a watch could shatter. Soberly she pulled into the drive at Queenscourt.

She got out and went into the side yard to the place behind the shrubbery where she had been re-gilding the party chairs to see if they were dry. She reached the place where she had placed them on carefully spread newspapers and stoppd.

The two fragile little gilt chairs were smashed to smithereens.

She backed away in horror. Suddenly the empty lawn with its long shadows seemed a desperately lonely place. She retreated into the house, heard the phone ring, ran to the library and picked it up. *Let it be Duke*, she prayed. Let him say, *I'm on my way home*.

Instead a shrill heartbroken voice screamed, "Murderer! You killed my little girl!" And broke down into sobs. Diane could hear the receiver being violently replaced.

She fell back, shaken. She had a new terror to face.

People thought Duke had murdered Mattie Sue.

Chapter 28

When Duke arrived, she'd had time to think, to get hold of herself. She greeted him with the news of Noreen's mishap—omitting the wax—and he shook his head wearily. "So you were home all day alone with the phone? I suppose you've been getting crank calls?"

"A few."

"Well, buck up," he said. "Whatever they've been saying to you can't be half so bad as what they've been saying to me. In very expressive ways. You'll notice the car's a bit battered. That's from a hail of bricks that landed on me this morning in front of the plant."

"Oh, *no!*" she wailed, and blurted out about Mattie Sue's body being found and the call that blamed Duke for her death.

"That's all we needed," he said grimly, "with the stockholders' meeting on Monday. Is this the mail? I see you haven't opened it."

"I forgot," she sighed. "It's been an awful day." And he took the pile of letters she'd tossed on the hall table and carried them into the living room, poured himself a drink.

"Maybe Francie will buy the house," she said hopefully, "and you'll have money to buy more stock."

He shook his head, downed his drink neat, opened a couple of letters, glanced at them, tossed them aside. "She's decided against it."

"Oh," said Diane in a small voice. "What about her proxy?"

"She said she'd let me know at the party," he said grimly, riffling through some obvious advertising, tossing it aside. "That's Francie—being dramatic, waiting to the last minute."

And keeping Duke dancing attendance to the end, Diane thought bitterly, needing her vote.

"How are things going—" she began and her voice drifted off. From the last letter Duke had ripped open two newspaper clippings had fallen to the floor. She didn't need to be told what was in them. She waited with her heart pounding as Duke picked them up.

He laid them down without comment, looked at Diane speculatively.

"Well," she said, stung, "aren't you going to *say* anything?"

"I'd seen them already," he said. "Copies were thoughtfully stuck in Cobbie's mailbox."

Diane collapsed in a chair.

"In a way I was almost glad to see these," he said calmly. "It told us who we're fighting—Emmeline Franklyn." He sighed. "It would have been nice to have Emmeline on our side, but since we haven't. . . ." he shrugged. "Francie will come through with her proxy. She always has. And that will give us a fighting chance."

Diane stared at him, stricken. His enemies had used *her* to defeat him . . . this newspaper smear campaign. If he'd married Francie, he'd have had what was needed to get him through this crisis—stock, the foundry, and lots of money. And gorgeous, overpowering Francie, whose reckless spirit Duke so admired.

That, she told herself, was why Francie hadn't given Duke her proxy yet. She was waiting. Waiting for him to beg her. And then she'd magnanimously save him . . . for a price. And the price would be to give up his wife for her.

Now that Diane had seen Duke against his own background, she understood why they called him The Steel Duke. It was part of him, this ruthless town, this industry. What would he give up to keep it? What, she asked herself, would *she* give up that he might keep it? The man himself?

Without realizing it, she had covered her face with her hands. Now Duke was gently taking them away.

"Diane," he said, "in every marriage there has to be a certain element of trust. I'm not concerned with what some idiot at the Courier writes about you. Only the facts. Although—" he flashed her a bleak smile—"I might slap his teeth for him."

She looked up at him with tear-wet eyes. "I brought this trouble on you," she said bitterly. "I didn't know Emmeline Franklyn was feuding with Cole and that she'd use this method to get at him."

"Maybe it isn't that," he said, getting up and striding restlessly around the room. "Maybe Emmeline's getting ambitious in her old age. Maybe she sees herself running the show. She can't swing this thing alone, not even with Garson Smelters' help. We'll have to see who she teams up with at the stockholders' meeting."

"I should have gone to Virginia," said Diane dully. "I've made trouble for you by staying here."

"Nonsense," he said cheerfully. "Wouldn't have been half as much fun without you." He paused, tipped her chin up with one finger. "Diane," he said, "we have to give this party, we're committed to it. Maybe we can still work out something."

She nodded helplessly.

"I'm going to take a shower," he said. "If the phone rings, answer it—it could be Cobbie. But if a strange voice speaks, just hang up, don't wait to hear a lot of unpleasant stuff."

His footsteps disappeared up the stairs and she sat envisioning life without him. An empty life, stretching drearily away across a dark and endless plain.

She plodded up the stairs, stood looking gloomily out of her bedroom window. Across the hedge at Westwind, she saw Cammie lugging a heavy basket, saw Jeff rush forward around the corner of the house to take the basket. There was something about the way his tall stooped figure bent toward her. Tenderness? And Cammie looked up at him . . . archly? Diane couldn't tell from this distance. She was reminded of an old apple tree that had stood gray and barren in their backyard for years, and then one season the man who always tended the garden got sick and quit. A load of stable manure had been left carelessly piled against the old tree. Diane had piled rocks over it, to make it look better. And the old tree, nourished, had bloomed the following year and born fruit, a few small delicious apples. She smiled wistfully after Cammie and Jeff, just disappearing around the corner of Westwind. Not everyone could be lucky but . . . Cammie might flower after all.

The day of the party dawned hot and muggy with a promise of afternoon thundershowers in the air. A day for irritation and short tempers—and disappointments. Hilde phoned, very apologetic that her maid Alice was having emergency dental work done and wasn't available after all.

Noreen was home with her broken arm. That left only Cammie, and Diane had a few bad moments when she remembered Cammie was Mattie Sue's aunt—she might not show up.

She gave a sigh of relief when Cammie stalked in, said grimly, "I want you to know, Mrs. Tarrant, I don't believe any of this loose talk that's going around." Diane wanted to hug her.

And later, she elaborated with, "Mattie Sue was my niece. And no better than she should be. But she had that pretty face." She gave the dough she was kneading a vicious whack. "Them that asks for trouble—gets it."

But Cammie was irritable, jumpy. She'd probably been through a lot with her relatives, realized Diane, listening to Cammie bang dishes, complain that the water wasn't hot enough, there might not be enough crackers for the canapes, and surely there wouldn't be enough ice for a party this size. Duke had gone into town to reconnoiter with Cobbie, Diane steeled herself not to answer the ringing phone, and she faced the ordeal of the party tonight with increasing misgivings.

Time moved swiftly.

In late morning Diane received a call from the Courier. She thought she recognized the same slightly sharp voice that had called her about doing a story on the house. Would Mrs. Tarrant mind if the newspaper covered her party? It would be a wonderful story for the society pages—who was there, what everybody wore. . . . Remembering the coverage the Courier had already given her, Diane could imagine what kind of photos and story would emerge if she granted this request. She said dryly this was her first party in MacQueensport and perhaps some other time. . . . At which the receiver banged down rather angrily, she thought.

So much for Emmeline Franklyn, she thought grimly.

Cammie went back to Westwind for lunch. Diane opened the double front doors and pushed chairs against them so they wouldn't swing shut. The big hall needed airing. She went back to the kitchen to make sure none of the food had been left out—it would be sure death to Duke's hopes if he gave his assembled stockholders ptomaine poisoning! But careful Cammie had put everything away. One of the sinks was stopped up. Diane used a plunger, got her hands dirty, and turned on the hot water.

It came out cold. She remembered Cammie's complaint about the water not being very hot. Hot water they must have tonight; everything must appear affluent and business-as-usual—no suggestion of a cold water flat. The big hot water heater was in the basement, she had seen it there. All she had to do was go down and relight the pilot, which had undoubtedly gone out.

She hesitated, tempted to wait for Cammie, tempted to call the gas company, told herself that was ridiculous and besides a water heater that large took time to heat up, she must get it started now.

Telling herself grimly that Lorna was not a kitchen or a basement ghost—that she only haunted the more luxurious parts of the house—and that it wouldn't be the style of the Extension dwellers to attack the house in broad daylight (she kept her mind firmly off the fact that the Extension was full of housemaids, and housemaids used *wax*, and her top steps had been *waxed* and that wax cleaned off, in broad daylight) Diane moved reluctantly to the basement door and opened it. It stretched before her, a dark hole. She switched on the light and the concrete stair sprang into dim relief, but beyond that there must be dead bulbs because there was only a dimness that had no edges. Carefully she walked down, noting that the darkness was partially caused by the dense shrubbery that blocked the small windows so that it was almost as dark here by day as by night. She hurried through the dim storerooms until she came to the inside room with the hot water heater. The pilot light was indeed out and there was a strong smell of gas in the room. She debated whether she should strike a match with that smell of gas about.

As she hesitated, she heard a door slam and simultaneously was plunged into darkness. For a sickening moment she remembered the stable door slamming shut, and cursed her foolhardiness in leaving the front doors open. Fighting panic, she edged to the wall, inched along it until she found a switch. The light stayed off. Then she held her breath, listening. She thought she had heard a sound from above. Now she heard it again, a woman's heels tapping in the distance above her head.

Duke gone and the servants away. . . .

Desperately Diane stumbled through the storerooms, unmindful as she banged her shins on the clutter. Then as her

eyes became accustomed to the dimness, she made out the shape of the gray basement stairs.

The door at the top, which she had left open, was closed. She crept up and carefully tried the knob.

It was locked. Or if not locked, something . . . *someone* was holding it. She felt her scalp prickle at the thought.

She crawled down the stairs backward, keeping her terrified eyes fixed on that door, ready for it to open at any time and something beyond imagination come hurtling through it.

Behind her the basement was quietly filling with gas.

There was a heavy box near the foot of the stairs, she could see it in the dimness. She dragged it into the next room, pushed it up against the wall below a window clouded with dirt and choked with shrubbery through which a little light oozed. Standing on the box, she could reach the latch. At first it resisted her, then it gave, grudgingly, and dirt and spiderwebs fell in her face. But she couldn't haul herself up the wall to climb out. And if she screamed, that would alert Whatever Waited behind the door.

The party chairs! No, they had all been brought up. Except one she had pronounced too rickety that had been left among the other plunder. She felt her way along the walls, passed the room with the water heater, noticed the smell of gas was stronger now, told her pounding heart Cammie would be back soon. But Cammie was on the deaf side; if she had the water running, would Cammie hear Diane if she screamed? Anyway, how could she be sure it would be Cammie who would answer the call?

Swallowing, she found the room where the chairs had been stored at last, snatched up the rejected folding party chair and edged back the way she had come, peered around her in the dimness, saw nothing had noticeably *changed*, no longer darker shadows loomed, put the chair on the box and climbed on top of it.

Standing on the chair, she could just inch her body through the narrow basement window. As she was halfway out, her foot knocked the chair over and it fell back inside the basement. She fought the shrubbery as she pulled herself out, got it tangled in her hair, and then she was lying on the ground, scrambled up and fought her way out of the shrubbery's clutching green arms.

She didn't know she was crying.

She had come out on the side toward Westwind and Cole, hands thrust in his pockets, was just coming jauntily through the hedge. At sight of her he stopped. His jaw dropped open. Then he broke into a run, and she ran toward him sobbing, unaware that her face was dirty, her hair snarled with twigs and cobwebs, her dress torn. She looked ghastly.

"Diane!" There was consternation in his eyes, his voice. "What's happened to you?"

"Someone locked me in the basement," she choked. "Did something to the fuse, so there weren't any lights. Gas all over—"

"What's it going to take to convince you?" cried Cole, grasping her shoulders. "Are you going to wait till you're lying dead on a slab in the mortuary? Oh, Diane—" his arms tightened about her—"leave him. Come away. Come live at Vair Hall with me."

"No." She tried to pull away, but he was too strong for her. His tight embrace held her, smotheringly. "Cole, no!"

"What does it take to get through to you?" he muttered, his hands still clenching her shoulders in a grip that hurt. "Someone's trying to kill you—and that someone isn't Lorna. I only said that to make you go away, save yourself. It's Duke."

Tears streamed down her cheeks. "No—no."

He stepped back sorrowfully, still holding her arms. "You just won't listen, will you? What if I told you Cobbie's car rolled down Trowbridge Road just a couple of minutes before I came through the hedge? And Duke was driving."

She flinched. "But he has no reason to hurt me, no reason."

"Francie Pelton's millions are his reason," said Cole grimly. "He thought she was lost to him when he married you. But she dumped her New York doctor and came back divorced, and he needs her proxies and her loot to get Tarrant Steel going again. Do you think he'd let you stand in the way of *that*?"

"I won't listen to you!" She tore free and ran blindly toward the house. She could hear him behind her, calling her name. He caught her at the front doors, still propped open with the chairs as she had left them.

"It isn't true!" she cried, her voice rising hysterically. "I

won't believe it. Somebody else did this—Lorna. She isn't dead, they didn't bury her, somebody saved her at the funeral parlor, she bribed him to keep still, she's *here*, she's *living* in the house!" She began laughing and crying at the same time.

Cole slapped her face and she stepped back, shaken.

"I'm sorry," he said shortly. "You were hysterical. Come along and we'll get the basement door open and I'll turn off the gas."

Disconsolate, she trailed along behind him. When they reached the back hall where the basement door was located, he turned and gave her a curious look.

The basement door was standing wide open, just as she had left it when she first went down.

Diane sagged against the wall. "I didn't make it up," she whispered. "It really happened. Somebody locked me in."

Cole reached forward and turned the switch. The lights came on obediently. Diane's hand flew to her mouth.

"Anybody down there?" called Cole.

There was no answer.

"I'll go down and turn the gas off," he muttered. "Get some air in this place. I'll open the basement windows."

He disappeared down the stairs. Diane threw open the kitchen windows and when he came up she asked him in a frightened whisper, "What's going on, Cole? What's happening to me?"

"I don't know," he said grimly. "But Cobbie's car was in the vicinity when it happened—with Duke driving. He could have done it for the insurance."

"I'm not insured," she said, staring at him.

"Ah, but Queenscourt is heavily insured, no doubt. And if this mighty pile blew up, taking you with it, he'd be loaded with cash and free to marry Francie Pelton."

She covered her face with her hands. "I'll never believe it," she whispered. "Not in a million years."

He said gently, "You haven't got that long, Diane. You'll believe it or you'll be dead. Soon. It's one or the other."

A sob caught in her throat.

From the front hall Cammie's voice called, "Do you want these front doors open, Mrs. Tarrant? Birds may fly in."

Birds. She hadn't thought about that.

"Close them, Cammie," called Cole.

They heard the sound of the front doors closing.

"Go wash your face," he told her grimly. "I'll try to stay close to you tonight and see that you at least survive your own party."

Chapter 29

After the day she had spent, throwing a party for a hundred guests seemed only an additional scene in a long nightmare. She went through the motions puppetlike, feeling she was somebody else.

For the occasion she had chosen a simple white chiffon, long and sleeveless, that swirled about her white sandals. Her shoulders gleamed. Her one conspicuous piece of jewelry was the chunky diamond ring Duke had given her. It touched her narrow wedding band and she looked down at it impersonally as if it were on somebody else's hand. With her silky hair fluffed out in a golden shawl, she looked absurdly young and troubled and very vulnerable.

"You look like a schoolgirl," Duke said lightly.

"My education has been getting its finishing touches recently," she sighed. "Let's hope Cammie is able to cope with strange help."

Together they went down the wide staircase. Diane kept her eyes averted from the newel post.

The first guests arrived. Effusive, uninteresting people, but large stockholders. Diane smiled and held her head high. She wanted to show Duke—to show the world—that she at least had complete confidence in her husband.

Ginny arrived in a low-cut pleated mauve chiffon with an Empire bodice. And Cole, looking rakish. And Hilde in a beige peau de soie with a covered lace jacket. And beside her, Ben looking like a sleepwalker. Kitty and Todd Feverell were conspicuous by their absence. Frieda Payne, in a boa, seemed to be trying to make up for that, gushing over Diane as if apologizing for her friendship with Kitty. Archer looked embarrassed. He had, she noted, a small patch of adhesive tape on one cheek, memento of yesterday's fracas at the plant, no

doubt. She felt a rush of sympathy for Frieda, who felt herself below the salt.

Except for the pointed absence of Emmeline Franklyn and Garson Smelters, it was shaping up into a nice evening.

And then Francie Pelton arrived and any hope of a nice evening was gone forever.

Francie strolled in wearing a clinging black gown cut almost to her navel, black coq feathers billowing, on the arm of a man Diane had never seen. Duke looked surprised and his eyes narrowed as he strode forward to greet the newcomers.

Diane smiled a welcome, but didn't catch the man's name. He had a face like flint, she thought, and a jagged scar across his neck as if . . . as if someone had tried unsuccessfully to cut his throat long ago!

"My God!" muttered Hilde in her ear, after Francie and her friend had swept away, "That's Girondello, isn't it?"

"Who?" Diane drew a blank on the name.

"That man who was in all the newspapers on a big stock swindle recently. They call him 'Three Fingers' because someone took after him in his youth with a meat axe and chopped off two of his fingers. I wonder where Francie found him!"

"I wonder what she wants with him!"

"Well, one thing you can count on, Francie always has her reasons. Ben said I wasn't to tell you this, but she and Duke had a tiff at the Club today. We'd just come in from the golf course when Duke left the bar and Francie followed and screamed something after him. He just walked away, but she was *livid*."

Diane's heart began to pound double time. Had Francie finally put it to him badly, *Get rid of your wife, if you want my proxy!*

"Thanks for telling me, Hilde." She moved away and Cobbie, coming up beside her with a drink in his hand, murmured, "I never thought Emmeline Franklyn would team up with Girondello, but that's what must have happened. I pity this town if Girondello gets control. His gang will take over the plant and the politics and the people. Prostitution, dope, all the rackets will flourish."

Her throat dry, Diane thought, *And I'll have brought it on them.* Her hands clenched. *How petty, how small of Emmeline Franklyn to casually ruin Duke, ruin them all, because*

of Cole's drunken slur! Her heart wept. It's all my fault. . . . Oh, Francie, you could save him. Please change your mind, please.

She saw through the crowd that Francie had found Duke, and moved toward them. They didn't see her.

Francie, her whole air a swagger, toyed with her drink and looked up sidewise at Duke. "Isn't my friend sinister?" she smiled, nodding at Girondello some distance away. "He's in ice cream." Her voice had an edge.

"He *pretends* to be in ice cream, Francie," said Duke. "Crime is his real occupation. Watch out you're not his victim instead of his friend."

Francie's eyes flashed. "Well, perhaps I'd rather be *his* victim than yours, darling," she mocked. "You're not going to walk out on *me* without taking a shellacking—and he's going to give it to you come Monday morning." Her smile grew brilliant. "With my proxy."

Duke seemed to grow taller and his face drained of color. "I wouldn't have thought it of you, Francie," he said quietly. "I always liked you, felt as if you were my little sister."

"*Liked!*" spat Francie contemptuously. "First Lorna and now this—this *child!*" She swung on her heel, almost bumped into Diane, and flounced away, coq feathers billowing.

"Well, that tears it," muttered Duke. He looked older, as if these last minutes with Francie had aged him. Diane studied his face with compassion. Francie loved him too. And Duke had said no. And Francie, like a spoiled child, was lashing out, striking back; she'd bring down their house, all right—there was no stopping her.

Unless . . . tears were falling in her heart . . . unless Diane gave him up.

Her eyes were wet and she went out into the cooler air of the summer night, walked beneath the bright paper lanterns. Her first big party at Queenscourt . . . and her last. She saw Uncle Trench being wheeled through the break in the hedge by Nora Allerton.

"Uncle Trench," she said warmly. "I'm so glad you could come."

Nora Allerton wailed, "Miss Ginny said not to bring him, but he *badgered* me so!"

Uncle Trench was sitting bolt upright. "She tried to give me sleeping pills so I'd miss it!" he said indignantly.

"She was afraid it would be too much excitement," sighed Nora Allerton.

"Going to see the fireworks, the pretty girls. And here's a flash for you, little Missy—I know what's going on in your house."

They had reached the swimming pool. People swirled around them.

"I'm sure you do, Uncle Trench," said Diane absently, ignoring his patter. She felt a spreading pain around her heart, and the beat said, *You'll never see him again, never, never, never. . .* She patted the old man's arm; Uncle Trench had lost someone too. And turned to greet a new arrival.

"You come back, I'll tell you all about it! I'll tell you what I see from my window!" he called, and Diane turned and smiled and said, "Yes, yes, later," and moved on beneath the brilliant swinging lanterns and the occasional showers of fireworks that lit the Ohio sky. Her first big party at Queenscourt . . . and her last.

She moved through the crowd, trying to find Duke, to fill her eyes with him this one last time. She wasn't committed yet, she hadn't made any promises to Francie, just one last time to look at him and know he was hers . . . forever. Forever. She tasted the word and it tasted like tears. Trying not to cry, she went on.

Duke came out of the house, talking to Cobbie and Archer, looking as if he hadn't a care. Diane leaned against a tree and fanned her hot face and watched them while Roman candles showered gold across the night sky. Only she could save him now. . . .

The hour of execution had come. She went inside to face the executioner.

Francie was staring sulkily ahead of her, ignoring everybody.

Diane touched her arm; she could see Girondello moving in. "Francie, I don't want to say this very loud but . . . if I leave Duke, will you give him your proxy?"

Francie stared at her. "Why would you do that?"

Diane took a deep breath. Her very heart hurt. "Because I love him," she said steadily. "I want him to be happy."

A kind of excitement had crept into Francie's tawny eyes. "You mean," she asked incredulously, "you'd go *and stay gone*?"

Diane nodded miserably. "Yes."

Girondello came up to them, a scowl on his face.

Francie turned to him. A cynical smile played across her mouth. "Girondello, little playmate," she said in a clear carrying voice, "you can get lost. I've just had a better offer."

Girondello's face convulsed, his scar was livid. "You filthy dame," he muttered. "I'll take care of you!" And turned and shouldered his way out. They could hear the violent slam of the front door behind him.

Francie's eyes narrowed. "I could whistle him back in time for the meeting, you know. Girondello's always open to offers. And come Monday morning, he'll still want my vote."

Diane turned away. Francie's voice, low and deadly, followed her. "I'll give Duke my proxy just before the meeting. But *only* if you've already gone."

Diane's cheeks were wet. She nodded, bent over a tray of drinks and managed inconspicuously to wipe the tears away.

Duke caught her arm and pulled her out of the crowd, into the trophy room and closed the door. "Now what," he said, "was all that about? I saw you talking to Francie and then Girondello came up and went roaring out. I need to know if he's going to try something."

She got her voice to working. "Francie's going to give you her proxy on Monday, Duke, Girondello left in a rage when she told him."

Duke stared at her. "And what did you say to Francie that made her change her mind?"

"I told her if she'd give you her proxy I'd—leave you."

The expression on his face was a thing to behold. "*You did what?*" He spaced his words. She backed away. "It is my hard luck," he said bitterly, "to be surrounded by women who are stark raving mad. What makes you think you can barter me off between you like a load of coal? Now stop making a damn fool of yourself and get out there and play hostess. It's almost time for the fireworks to begin outside."

"You're paying too high a price for me, Duke," she said sadly. "You'll regret it. And then it will be too late."

"Move!" thundered Duke. "By God, I'd be well rid of you both!" He threw the door open and stalked across the hall. Diane followed in his wake, feeling like a cork being bobbed about in the swell of a great wave.

An orange light suddenly lit up the living room windows

and was followed by a brilliant green shower and a thunderous boom. The main fireworks display in the long meadow across from the house had begun. Clutching their drinks, her guests began to crowd outside where gold and pink and magenta paper lanterns bobbed from the trees.

She joined the flow and went outside, murmuring to the servants to watch their step in carrying trays out here, they could trip over a root, and bumped into Hilde, who said, "Oops, didn't spill my drink on you, did I?" And then, peering through the trees, "There's Leda Banning. I see Chester brought her back from Tahoe. For how long, I wonder?" She pulled Diane into the shadow of a big oak. "Diane," she blurted, "Ben would kill me if he knew I'd told you this, but—well, he has this sort of dual loyalty. It was the Franklyn interests that gave him his job, you know. I mean, his father bought heavily into Franklyn Steel, but Ben would never have gotten the job as General Counsel without Emmeline's okay. And . . . she's asked him about moving up to Chairman of the Board, if he'll vote his stock the way she wants him to."

"Against Duke," said Diane. "That's what Frieda was talking to you about that day, wasn't it?"

Hilde flushed. "Yes," she admitted. "Emmeline was pressuring Archer to talk to his friends. Isn't it awful? And there's poor Ben, caught between Duke and Emmeline Franklyn."

"What's Ben going to do?"

Hilde shrugged helplessly. "I don't know. Of course, if I had my way, I'd vote every share for Duke and to the devil with Emmeline. But Ben points out we have two daughters and there's our future to consider. . . ."

Diane grimaced. Ben had his future to consider, Archer had his future to consider. . . . "I'm sure he'll do the right thing, Hilde," she said tiredly. "Whatever that is."

Hilde patted her arm. "I just mean, when he votes her way at the meeting, I wanted you to know *why*, Diane."

Diane nodded wordlessly and moved on into the mainstream of her guests. Suddenly Frieda Payne grasped her arm.

"I want you to know Archer had nothing to do with what happened at the Foundry," said Frieda nervously, biting her

lips. "He's just found out Francie incited it and he's furious. You know, he got hurt pulling Todd out of that melee."

The music from the stereo drifted out to them and rockets and Roman candles exploded in green and gold showers overhead.

Diane pressed Frieda's hand. "It's all right, Frieda," she said with a confidence she didn't feel. "Duke has complete confidence in Archer. He told me so." She patted Frieda's arm absently and thought, *I'm acting just like it's all going to turn out all right, when I know it isn't.*

Abruptly the house lights went out, the paper lanterns lost their glow; the areas beneath the trees were plunged into total darkness.

"A fuse must have blown," Diane began, and Frieda interrupted sharply. "Something's going on."

Diane looked the way Frieda pointed and saw that there were milling figures in the road. She knew instinctively that these weren't party guests. She saw now that groups were moving in from the meadow across the road where the townsfolk had turned out for the Fourth of July fireworks. Now she could hear angry voices at the hedge, a scuffling in the driveway. There was the sound of breaking glass and angry shouts. Then a car with flashing red lights roared down Trowbridge Road and skidded to a halt at the gates and Sam Wadleigh and four men got out saying, "Break it up now, break it up," and people began clearing out.

Someone must have fixed the fuse for the lights went on inside, and outside the colorful lanterns sprang into life.

A woman's scream rent the air.

It came from the direction of the pool and Diane, along with Frieda and most of the other guests, stampeded in that direction. She pushed through the crowd gathered about the willow where, at an angle, rested an empty wheelchair.

And in the dark water, lit fitfully by the swinging paper lanterns, face down, floated the fragile remains of Trencherton Westcott. Those nearby stood rigid, staring spellbound at the body. Archer Payne broke the spell. He plunged into the pool, dragged the frail body to the edge and, helped by Cobbie, gently lifted him out. Ginny came running, screamed, "No! No!" And turned accusingly to Nora Allerton who shrank back and wailed, "I only left him for a minute!" And

Hilde, always capable, plunged forward to give mouth-to-mouth resuscitation. But it was too late.

Uncle Trench had gone to join the girl he'd loved and lost so long ago.

Diane stared down at Uncle Trench's limp wet form and her heart thudded. *I'll tell you what I see from my window*, he had called. And someone . . . something . . . had heard him. And now he was dead, drowned in that pool where Lorna's size-8 shoes patrolled.

Chapter 30

Hurriedly the party guests began to depart. They brushed past Diane, saying quick good-bys in hushed voices. The servants were unstrung; one dropped a whole tray of drinks. Diane told them to go home, not to bother cleaning up.

When the ambulance came, Ginny, her voice breaking, said she couldn't sit there watching Uncle Trench, knowing he was dead, and Duke said, "I'll take you in my car," and added something which made Diane proud. "Diane can take care of things. She's doing just fine."

Diane found herself crying as the ambulance rolled away and she pulled the plug on the strings of bright paper lanterns that had lit their last disaster at Queenscourt. As she went back into the house she saw that only Cole, seeming by now very drunk, was left, and Cobbie, very pale, sitting on a rose brocade loveseat in the hall, one hand clutching his chest.

"Are you all right?" she asked anxiously, remembering Duke had said Cobbie had a history of heart trouble.

He nodded weakly. "Your guests—"

"Are all gone. Do you need a doctor, Cobbie?"

"I'm afraid so." His face was wan. "I'll just sit here a minute and then drive to the emergency room at the hospital."

"I'll take you in my car," said Cole, wobbling up.

"I'll do it," said Diane. "Cobbie's car is here."

"I blew a tire on a nail in your driveway," gasped Cobbie. "I'd forgotten . . . Better let Cole take me."

"Cole's in no condition to drive," said Diane grimly.

"Then be my guest." Carelessly, Cole tossed her his key-ring. "Take my keys and drive him in. I'll toddle on home and pick up my car tomorrow."

Gratefully she caught the keys, with Cole's help got Cobbie carefully loaded into the car, asked Cole to lock up and turn

off the lights, and headed out the drive. Cobbie, slumped beside her, patted her arm and murmured, "Good of you, Diane." Listening to his rasping breath frightened her and she drove as fast as she dared, getting him to the Emergency Room at the hospital.

Down the hall, she ran into Duke.

"There was nothing they could do for Trencherton, of course," he said, looking harassed. "Ginny's very cut up. She's gone to wash her face in the ladies' room, but I think she really just wants to be alone. I wouldn't disturb her, if I were you, give her time to sort things out." And at the expression on her face, he asked quietly, "What's wrong, Diane?" And, puzzled, "How did you get here? Where's your purse?"

"I must have left it at Queenscourt," sighed Diane. "Everything happened so fast. Cobbie had a heart attack. I came in and found him sitting on a loveseat in the front hall clutching his chest. He'd blown a tire, so Cole lent me his car—and stayed and locked up."

Her heart constricted at the look of concern on Duke's face. His oldest, most trusted friend. "Where is Cobbie?"

"They've got him in the Emergency Room," said Diane.

"I'll go see how he is. Sit down. You look tired."

Duke strode away and she sank down in one of the green plastic chairs the hospital provided for such as she. She closed her eyes, feeling very depressed, and rested her head against the cream-painted wall behind her.

When Duke didn't come back right away, she decided to go on home. She was achingly tired and guessed that Duke would want to stay at the hospital until he knew Cobbie was going to be all right. She left word at the desk that she'd gone home and drove out into the oppressive heat of the summer night. She didn't see the other car that drove out right behind her as she headed Cole's car back toward Queenscourt.

Thunder rumbled in the distance and sheet lightning lit up the night sky with blue fire. Nature's fireworks outstripping those of Collins County's Glorious Fourth, she thought wryly.

As she turned in the drive she saw a light in the living room. Duke was home ahead of her then, she thought, surprised but wanting nothing so much as to fall into his arms, have him hold her. She took the key out of the ignition, wear-

ily selected the big front door key from the ring and let herself in, walked into the long living room. "Duke?"

To her surprise, Cole rose up from a chair and held out a drink. "I changed my mind," he stated. "Didn't want you coming back to an empty house."

Gratefully she accepted the drink, sank into a velvet chair.

Cole leaned forward. "Diane," he said softly, "Come away with me. Chuck it all and walk off. I'd be a changed man with you beside me."

Diane stared at him. He looked changed now. A short time ago she'd thought he was very drunk, but now he seemed alert and something wild and reckless stared brightly out of his eyes.

"You know I couldn't do that," she reproved him.

"Sure you could!" He frowned, moved about restlessly. "Well, drink up," he said impatiently. "You look about to pass out."

In that at least she could please him. She swallowed the contents of her glass.

On top of a clap of thunder the phone rang. Diane jumped.

"Let it ring," said Cole in a surly voice.

"No, it might be Duke." She turned and picked it up, her back to him.

Duke's voice came over the line, sounding perturbed. "I couldn't find you," he said. "Diane, how did you get in the house?"

Diane blinked. "Why—I opened the door with the key on the ring."

"Diane," he shouted, "*get out of that house!*"

With another clap of thunder, the line went dead. Diane tensed as the impact of it hit her. She had opened the front door with a key off Cole's keyring. And she had been too tired to correlate the meaning of that.

Cole had had the keys to Queenscourt all the time!

She whirled and saw that he was holding the torn ends of the phone wire, ripped from the wall, in his hand. He was smiling.

She dropped the phone and tried to run for the door. He caught her easily, held her struggling.

"You did all this!" she cried. "Why, Cole? Why?"

"Lorna gave me the keys long ago." His voice was almost caressing. "I loved Lorna. She was mine, she was always

mine. But Duke took her from me, just as he took my father's company away from him." His jaw hardened. "But I won her back, she was going to run away with me. Duke killed her for that. I know because she called Ginny to warn me Duke was coming home and we'd have to wait till later. And she wound up dead. But I saw to it Duke couldn't keep another woman in Lorna's house. I drove off two others and I'd have driven you off too, but I . . . fell in love with you, Diane."

"Love!" she cried scornfully. "You tried to kill me! That pill in the aspirin bottle, the wax on the stairs, you locked me in the basement to be blown up!"

He clenched her with a grip that hurt. "I didn't do any of those things. Believe me, it was Duke. I smashed the chairs and fiddled with fuses and shoes and stuff. But I never tried to hurt you, Diane—that was Duke. Come on." He urged her forward. "You're going to pack a bag."

"To go where?" she panted, as he dragged her up the stairs. And when he didn't answer, she dug in her feet at the top of the stairs, clung to the bannister. "Kill me now," she said hysterically, "because I'm not going with you."

"You're going," he said, his grip tightening until her arm was numb. "And I've no intention of killing you. Not now and not later. Because it's been my damned misfortune to fall in love with you. I'm taking you out of here, and I'm going to put half a world between Duke and me. By the time Duke finds you, you'll have been living in Beirut as 'Mrs. Coleman Vair' for some time."

"I won't do it!" Frantically, she fought his grasp.

"You'll quiet down," he said dangerously, "as soon as that pill I put into your drink takes effect. Things will get muzzy, and I'll see to it that they stay muzzy until we're well away."

Her drink, he had drugged it! She stared at him in horror, even as he spoke feeling a sense of lethargy steal treacherously over her. With a sob, she tried to burst away from him.

"I'll be good to you, Diane." He was panting as she struggled with him. "Damn it, can't you see why I have to do this? I can't let Duke have you, and I can't hurt you!"

"You aren't taking Diane anywhere because I'll stop you." Ginny's light voice came from somewhere behind them. Cole's grip loosened and Diane sagged against the railing. Deliverance!

Approaching them she saw a new Ginny, a Ginny whose face had suddenly come alive and blazed with beauty. Her large luminous eyes were lit up like a Christmas tree. Her high light voice held a melting sweetness. She looked young and alive and—for the first time since Diane had known her—completely beautiful. Even in her drugged state, Diane marveled.

And in Ginny's slender right hand was Uncle Trench's little blue snub-nosed gun. She held it steadily and her eyes were gray and lustrous like the steel. Her left hand held—keys!

And behind Ginny—Diane closed her eyes in disbelief and opened them again—behind Ginny something was forming. The window at the end of the hall blew open with force and a strong draft came down the hall, stirring the drapes, ruffling her hair. It was cold . . . before the storm . . . windy weather before storms. Diane felt light-headed, irrational, strangely like an observer. She clung to the thought that Ginny would save her.

But behind Ginny, as she walked, a force was gathering. Something undefined and gauzy that roiled about, blown into tatters by the strong wind that now blew through Diane's hair. In spite of the wind, Diane felt smothered, as if air were being sucked out of her lungs instead of forced into them. Behind Ginny now something walked. Or drifted. She could see it in frozen flashes, like the opening and closing of a camera shutter—not slow motion, nor yet cessation of action, but a jagged staccato on and off appearance rippling with energy, bursting with energy, an electrical sort of charge that seemed to flicker, that tracked Ginny soundlessly down the dark windswept hall.

It was Lorna!

For a dazzled moment, Diane could see her clearly, the face of the woman in the photograph, wild black hair blowing, white teeth flashing in a terrible mocking smile, brilliant green eyes fixed glowingly on the back of Ginny's head. Diane tried to open her dry mouth to speak, to scream, but no sound came out. She stood breathless and stiff, as if turned to stone.

Cole seemed not to see it. His head was lowered, his eyes riveted on the gun. On the keys. "You stole my keys when I was drunk, didn't you?" he accused. "And had a set made . . .

Go home, Ginny. Go home and forget what you saw. I'm paying Duke back for killing Lorna, for killing my girl. It's a blood debt."

Behind Ginny the apparition wavered, became taller, shrank. The eyes were terrible.

"Lorna was no good," said Ginny. "She'd have thrown you over, just like Duke. She tired of men and tossed them aside. You remember that, don't you?"

Other men, his stubborn expression said. "Clear out, Ginny. This isn't your affair."

The blue-black gun came up angrily. "*You're* my affair, Cole. You belong to me. Not to Lorna, not to Diane. You're *mine*. I killed Uncle Trench for you—" her voice broke; with an effort she got control of herself—"because he was going to blurt out to Diane that I'd been coming over here, using my keys to get in. Your infidelities I could overlook—" her voice grated—"but your women are *not* to take you away. Not Lorna. And not this one."

In that moment Diane, dizzy with fear, knew why Ginny only despised Kitty, who had presented no real threat, but hated Lorna and herself, who had the ability—though in Diane's case not the desire—to remove Cole physically from the neighborhood.

"You're not taking Diane anywhere, Cole," Ginny added softly, "because I'm going to kill her." She cast a nasty look at Diane. "You certainly have nine lives, but this time you won't get away!"

Diane shrank back against the railing. Not deliverance—execution. She wanted to scream, to protest, to run, but she couldn't. She was held rigid while the apparition behind Ginny shimmered and wavered to and fro, its swirling arms reaching out, the long fingers clenching and unclenching, melting and fading, becoming suddenly hard-edged, clear.

It was as if the Thing behind Ginny took its energy from her, Diane, so that It could move freely while she was held in thrall. That was what Ginny had once said of Lorna—*people had no will to resist her*.

She saw the sudden dawning comprehension in Cole's eyes, saw his face turn to chalk. "*You* killed Lorna?" he said slowly. "*You*, Ginny? Her friend?"

"I was never her friend," said Ginny bitterly. "I hated her

all my life. She took *you* from me. And now this one's doing the same thing."

This one. Diane. Weak with horror, Diane heard Ginny cock the gun. And closed her eyes. This was the moment of death.

"No!" shouted Cole, and Diane's eyes snapped open as he flung himself between them. The gun spoke, filling the world with noise. Cole gasped as the bullet tore into him, and fell in slow motion to the floor, a red stain spreading over his white shirt front.

Diane heard Ginny's agonized, "Cole!" heard the gun clatter to the floor as she bent over him, and suddenly Cole's fingers slid across the floor, closed over the gun and pointed it upward at Ginny.

"No, Cole, don't!" Ginny started up and whirled to run—and three things happened at once:

Downstairs the front door crashed open and Duke burst in.

Cole's hand sank lifeless to the floor and the gun slipped from his dead fingers.

Still paralyzed, her scream frozen in her throat, Diane saw Ginny whirl and encounter the spectre. Now not only Diane saw it—*Ginny saw it too*. Saw that wavering flickering shape that was Lorna to the life, with its eyes of glowing green, become in the windswept hall a being almost humanly dense, so that only in flashes could the background of the hall be seen through her figure. Saw Lorna's spectral right arm draw back, saw Lorna's bright smile flash suddenly, heard above the noise of the wind a wild laugh ring out, as that white arm swept unswervingly toward Ginny.

Caught at the top step, Ginny screamed and whirled again.

And pitched headfirst down the long stairway, her own scream mingling with that wild, reckless, terrible, jarring laughter, to crash into the newel post, her head striking its sharp point, a great gash appearing as she hurtled to the floor to land sprawled like a broken doll at Duke's feet in the hall below.

And at the top of the stairway, Lorna, her figure suddenly frozen in the wind, her bright smile frozen on her face, her laughter echoing through the icy windswept hall, stared down with her glowing green eyes at Ginny's broken neck, at the blood oozing from a cut on her head. And from Lorna's temple a bright red stain appeared, the only thing about her

that moved, pouring down out of that wild black static hair, upended and standing out as if 30,000 volts coursed through her.

From below Duke saw Diane sagging over the railing and thundered up the stairs, vaulting over Ginny's body. "Diane!"

At the head of the stairs that wild spectre flickered, immobile, with its bright terrible smile. As Duke reached Diane, the scream that had been stuck in her throat ripped out and filled the air, and as she moved the spectre faded so that it was only a cold draft of wind blowing down the hall, damp and bringing with it the promise of rain.

Diane fell against Duke, pouring out her story between sobs, and all the yearning, all the love she had ever felt for him crystallized in that moment as she saw the leaping fear in his eyes—fear for her—and the great relief that swept over him that she was standing here alive, safe, in his arms.

As she finished, she buried her head in his chest, overcome by an uncontrollable shaking.

"It's all right," he soothed her. "It's all right." It was the same tone he used to quiet a terrified thoroughbred. You could take confidence from that voice. Diane did. "Keep moving," he said. "Keep walking. I knew when I saw Ginny take off in my car that something was wrong—and when I called the house and you answered the phone, I knew what it was. Keep walking, Diane."

He bent over Cole, who lay with a little smile on his face . . . perhaps with Lorna now.

Ginny's crumpled form lay broken and twisted at the bottom of the stairs, her head at a crazy angle that meant her neck had snapped, the light gone from her face. She had flared up like a nova, streaking across the night sky, had blazed for a triumphant moment and now was gone into darkness . . . the dark silent world of death.

That vision of the spectral Lorna washed over Diane again.

"You saw her," she chattered. "*You saw.*"

"I saw something," Duke said reluctantly, straightening up. "A trick of the light as I heard you scream."

"Ginny killed Lorna," Diane said slowly. "And Lorna wasn't content just to do her in. She wanted a public execution. With an audience. And she had one."

He gave her a wry look. "Lorna always liked a party. . . ."

Outside the storm broke, and hail like frozen tears for the dead beat against the windowpanes.

Later Diane remembered that night in bits and pieces. The hot coffee, the doctor, the endless walking to keep the drug from taking effect, the questions, the men who came and went out of the rain, tramping mud over the rugs. And next day photographers, flashbulbs, reporters and more questions.

Duke told them the bare bones of the story, how Ginny had killed Lorna to prevent her running off with Cole, and killed Cole when he tried to abduct Diane. He never mentioned the spectre. He said Ginny had swiveled around when he burst in the front door, and had fallen downstairs to die as Lorna had. A kind of fitting justice.

Diane corroborated that.

People believed her. They believed Duke. Those who had wanted to hurt him now came back, shamefaced.

Except for Francie Pelton and Emmeline Franklyn and Garson Smelters. So they were still losers.

Duke kept in touch with the hospital by phone about Cobbie's progress. In the late afternoon Cobbie underwent open-heart surgery. Duke's face was grim. She could see he wanted to be at the hospital, but he didn't want to bring a barrage of cameramen and noisy reporters with him.

She brought him coffee in the long living room. He stood drinking it, looking out the high arched windows toward Westwind. "I liked old Trencherton," he said. "I'm sorry to see him go."

No word for Ginny, no word for Cole, those friends who had played him false. She had a feeling their names would never cross his lips again.

Nobody mentioned Mattie Sue. . . .

Photographers, newspaper reporters, curiosity seekers cluttered the wet lawn. Until Sam Wadleigh posted a man to keep them back. Whenever anyone came or went, flash bulbs exploded. Diane stayed away from the windows.

Hilde called, commiserating. She said she'd talked to Ben like a Dutch uncle and no matter what Emmeline Franklyn did, Duke was going to have their votes. Diane's throat felt dry. She thanked Hilde, knowing it wouldn't help.

And Frieda called, sounding subdued. Diane assured her there was nothing she could do.

Afternoon brought Cammie, eyes red-rimmed, and behind

her, embarrassed and shifting his feet, old Jeff, looking stooped and sad. "We came because we wanted you to know we didn't know nothing about *any* of it, Miss Diane," said Cammie earnestly. Not Mrs. Tarrant—*Miss Diane*. Acceptance on Trowbridge Road at last. . . . Diane felt her throat close.

"They'll be closing Westwind," added Cammie, "and we want you to know if you need any help—well, the whole staff feels the same way. Jeff and me, we're thinking of getting married, Miss Diane. We'd like to work someplace together and we thought of working here. For you. Memories don't bother me no more. I see things clearer now. I been livin' in the past too much."

Looking into Cammie's honest homely face, Diane couldn't bring herself to say they'd be closing Queenscourt too, or living there without enough money to meet the taxes. She said huskily, "Thank you, Cammie. I'm so glad for you and Jeff. We're very upset right now but—we'll let you know." And Cammie pressed her hand and left.

Ginny's flawless staff had just been offered to her in a body, she thought wryly, and she couldn't accept. The do-it-yourself Duchess had played out the game and lost.

"Duke," she said that night, as he held her in his arms, her voice trembling, "Duke, if I leave, you still have a chance. Francie's proxy."

"If you leave," he said against her hair, "I'll go after you and the hell with the rest of it."

With a wild sob of joy, she held him close to her. But a nagging voice inside said how would he feel a year, ten years from now? Knowing she'd ruined him. . . .

They had only this one night before the axe fell.

Chapter 31

When she awoke, after an exhausted sleep, she saw Duke fully dressed with his hands in his trouser pockets, standing with his back to her staring out the window. She lay there watching him for a moment. *Magnificent*, she thought proudly, *even in defeat. . . .*

"Duke," she asked, "how is Cobbie?"

He didn't turn around. "Still in intensive care. The prognosis is good but no one can speak to him. Until this afternoon."

Her heart sank. That meant Cobbie's considerable shares would not be voted for Duke.

"Is there . . . any chance for us at all?"

"Not a chance in hell," he said moodily. "Chester Banning's wife left him again last night," he added, "and he's pursuing her. Probably in Canada by now. With the stockholders' meeting upcoming at ten o'clock today. Now there's a fine example of devotion to duty."

"I thought he'd just brought her back from Tahoe. Kitty said so."

Duke snorted. "Brought her back and she's gone again."

Diane digested that. "I've seen her running in and out of the Club," she volunteered. "Always laughing."

"And now she's had the last laugh," Duke said grimly. "She's probably ruined him. He's been telephoning various people all night, asking them if they've seen her. Not a word about how the meeting will go without him. Shows how a woman can wreck a man when she sets out to do it."

"But I thought Chester Banning would be chairing the meeting."

"As current President and Chairman of the Board, I thought so too," said Duke. "But apparently we'll make do with the second in command."

"All that stock you bought on borrowed money. . . ." Her troubled voice reached him.

"It's down, Diane, way down because of this proxy fight and the strike. I'll have to sell it, of course, but it won't cover what I borrowed. And I've no intention of dragging Cobbie down with me."

No, you wouldn't do that, she thought, feeling a surge of pride in him even as her eyes stung with tears.

"So the only way to make up the difference. . . ."

Is to sell Queenscourt, she thought. She was silent for a while, thinking about that, staring around her at the luxurious bedroom, with which no doubt they would soon part as being unfeasible for their new poverty status.

"Maybe we shouldn't go to the meeting," she said tentatively. "Just let them call us and tell us what happened."

"*Not go?*" He swung around to face her, his expression incredulous. Seeing her, disheveled and lovely in the big bed, his eyes softened. "How little you know me even now, Diane. Nothing would keep me away. I'd go if I had two broken legs!"

Her heart twisted and hurt. *Roland defending the pass at Roncesvalles*, she thought, *swinging his mighty broadsword against an army while his own lay dead. Yes, Duke would go if only to face them down; he wasn't the kind to back away from a fight—even one he was sure to lose.*

She jumped out of bed determined to match him. If he could do it, so could she. *The Steel Duke's lady. . . .* She dressed carefully. This might be her last public appearance in this part of the world, she told herself. The price of Tarrant Steel stock was down since Duke had invested all that borrowed money . . . there'd be the piper to pay. And would the debacle take Queenscourt with it? she wondered, drawing a lipstick across her soft mouth. Not that it mattered. Queenscourt was the perfect setting for a Steel Duke. Not for a man who was broke.

She studied her reflection in the mirror critically. A narrow off-white sleeveless dress that left her shoulders gleaming. Slim white sandals, a short strand of pearls and the chunky diamond to let the world know they still had it. Sun-bleached taffy hair shining, blue eyes serene. For a do-it-yourself Duchess she didn't look too bad.

She went downstairs, feeling her nerves tingle as she passed

the place where night before last Cole had dragged her upstairs and Ginny had met him with a gun and found . . . something waiting. She stared down the hall. The curtains blew lightly at the end and the air smelled fresh and clean as if . . . something had gone from it. *Had she really seen . . . what she saw?* she asked herself. Or was it only the effect of the drug Cole had given her plus the fear engendered by the traps Cole and Ginny had laid for her?

From the kitchen window as she fixed instant coffee—neither of them felt like eating anything—she saw Cammie moving around in the yard at Westwind, and wondered who would move in. Frieda and Archer perhaps, if Archer ever got his vice presidency. Cammie's shoulders drooped a little and Diane's heart went out to her; she had given her life to Trowbridge Road and its unhappy residents, and now she would have to work for new people, perhaps somewhere else. She determined she would tell Cammie right after the meeting she wouldn't be needing her or the Westwind staff. It wasn't fair to keep them dangling.

Duke drank his coffee, looked at his watch. "We'd better get started," he said restlessly, and got up, stretching his long legs.

In the hall the mail had been tossed through the slot in the door. He picked it up, riffled through it, frowned and opened a letter. "It's from Joe Mansfield at Carlin Steel," he muttered and Diane's heart fluttered. The Carlin Steel Corporation of Youngstown, she knew, owned a big bloc of Tarrant Steel stock.

He tossed the letter down. "He's offering me a job," he said wryly. "Wants me to manage their Houston operation. That tells us something, doesn't it?"

Yes, she thought sadly, it tells us the word is out that the king is dead. Long live the—

"Duke," she asked, as they climbed into the long white car, "if you don't get the Presidency of Tarrant Steel, who will? No one's been put up for nomination, have they?"

"That," he said, swinging the big car out of the drive, "is what we're going to find out. Today."

Heads high, they drove into MacQueensport to the big downtown Westwind Hotel where the stockholders' meeting was being held. A couple of flash bulbs went off as they climbed out of the car, several reporters pressed forward and

one, who said he was from the Huntsberry Clarion, asked, "What will happen in there, Duke?" Duke smiled at him gently. "No comment."

There's no reporter from the Courier, thought Diane, her heart banging. That means we're dead and buried. The Courier is showing contempt.

And it was true. No one was going to save them. Cobbie was still in intensive care and couldn't be reached until this afternoon . . . too late. So his big holdings wouldn't be voted for Duke.

And Trencherton Westcott would not be wheeled in, as in prior years, to cast his big bloc of stock for Duke Tarrant . . . never again. Even Cole's stock, to keep up his pretense of friendship, would have been voted for Duke, she thought bitterly, if Duke had not taken a wife.

The gap had widened. Duke's enemies were going to have a field day.

Diane lifted her chin as high as she thought Guinevere might have when going to the stake, favored reporters and cameramen alike with a light-hearted photogenic smile—which was duly photographed—and sauntered arrogantly into the hotel on Duke's arm as if she hadn't a care in the world. The barest answering pressure of his arm on hers told her he approved her stance.

Behind her as she crossed the lobby's marble floor she heard one of the reporters say, "There he goes to take a drubbing, looking like he owns the earth. You gotta admit the guy has class." And felt her eyes sting with pride.

"Yeah," muttered someone else. "Guy from the Courier told me—" She could imagine what the guy from the Courier had told him! She walked on beside Duke, through the great gilded double doors at the far end that opened into the Grand Ballroom, which had been set up in style for the meeting, with a speaker's platform draped in yellow linen tablecloths and a battery of microphones.

Diane had never before attended a stockholders meeting. To her surprise—for she'd had the mistaken notion that all Tarrant Steel's stock was held by millionaires in big blocs—there was a sizable crowd present, half-filling the rows of gaudy cream and gilt chairs that occupied most of the gaudy cream and gilt ballroom.

They passed Archer and Frieda Payne in the back row.

Archer looked upset. Frieda, in pink, looked frightened. She stared, big-eyed, at Diane.

And then Kitty, very chic in red linen, with Todd beside her, his head and one eye bandaged, looking grim and wan, as if he belonged in a hospital bed. Kitty stared at Diane, her eyes kindling for a moment, and turned quickly away.

Midway down the big room Hilde turned and gave her a little wave of encouragement. Beside Hilde, stern and gray, sat Ben, looking as if he had come through a recent illness but would recover. Diane rather thought he would. Time had a way of blunting the sharp edges of tragedy.

Across the room, striking in burnt orange, Francie Pelton watched them with suppressed excitement. Beside her was Girondello, his dark face impassive. They'd made up their differences, Diane thought grimly.

In the second row sat Emmeline Franklyn, dressed in black, her hair a silver coronet, staring straight ahead. And beside her Garson Smelters, moving uneasily as if his collar were too tight.

Someone jumped up and made a place for them on the front row. She heard the ballroom doors swing shut.

The men at the head table muttered together nervously.

"What are they waiting for?" she whispered.

"Banning," said Duke grimly. "They're giving him a few more minutes."

As he spoke the big ballroom doors were flung open and a harassed looking man strode into the room. "Well, I see he made it," muttered Duke, as all heads turned to watch Chester Banning, looking washed out, his clothes crumpled as if he'd slept in them, march down the aisle, ascend the three steps to the long red-carpeted platform, shake hands with the men at the head table—Diane saw relief on all their faces—and bang down the gavel. "The meeting will come to order," he said. "Ladies and gentlemen, the Annual Stockholders' Meeting is now in session."

The meeting began. There was some desultory business, papers rustled, droning reports were read, figures that mystified Diane.

Banning rose. "Before opening the floor for nominations for President," he said, "I have an announcement to make. Due to personal reasons, I will no longer be a candidate for this office. I shall also tender my resignation as Chairman of the

Board at the Board Meeting this afternoon. I wish to thank all my friends for their support. The floor is now open for nominations for President of Tarrant Steel."

Duke's name was placed in nomination—by Archer Payne.

And over his protest, Banning's, by an exuberant little stockholder who roared, "Chester's our man! Win with Banning!"

And Girondello's. Diane shot a look at Francie. She looked triumphant.

Nominations were closed. The voting began.

Abruptly Emmeline Franklyn was on her feet. Her voice rang out. "Mr. Chairman, I request a point of personal privilege."

The Chairman looked surprised. Everyone's head swung toward the erect older woman in black, leaning lightly on her silver-headed cane. Beside Diane, Duke's jaw hardened a little but his expression remained bland.

Now it begins, thought Diane with a sinking heart. *Now they'll get him.*

"I wish to announce at the outset that as a long-time stockholder I will vote my considerable shares for the next President of Tarrant Steel," said Emmeline. "A man who against remarkably adverse circumstances has never wavered." On the podium Chester Banning's cheeks pinked a little and Diane remembered hearing Cobbie say that Emmeline had always liked Banning. And was undoubtedly trying to bolster him now, to make him change his mind and accept the nomination after all—doubtless so she could crush Duke without having to, as Cobbie inferred, make a "deal" with organized crime and its front, Girondello. She watched Emmeline narrowly as the older woman turned so that people could hear her better, a position that caused her to face Diane. "There is only one man for this job," declared Emmeline ringingly. "He has my support and he deserves and should have yours. Mr. Chairman, I will vote all my shares for the man most suited to the job—Duke Tarrant. And—" she turned to consider the Southerner beside her—"my longtime friend Garson Smelters assures me that he will vote his considerable shares and proxies for Duke Tarrant as well."

She sat down. An excited murmur swept the room. Heads clustered together. Diane felt a ripple go through Duke's arm, but his face was impassive.

Thunderstruck at this reversal, and looking at Emmeline's ravaged face now turned toward Duke—those green eyes, that once dark hair—suddenly Diane *knew*.

A desperate woman in her forties whose husband had rejected her for all the trash in town. A sympathetic neighbor with a mad wife, to whom no one would listen when she said the baby wasn't hers.

This was Lorna's mother . . . who had visited her own child as an "orphan," who could never claim her daughter because her son had ambitions to be Secretary of State.

Diane's eyes widened.

Emmeline wasn't petty, she wasn't small. She hadn't been out to get Cole, she'd been out to get Duke! Because, like the town, she'd believed Duke had killed Lorna, and she'd been avenging her daughter's death with the tools at hand—her stocks, her old friends, her newspaper.

And now Emmeline knew the truth . . . and so did Diane.

Abruptly, the voting began to fall into line. Little shareholders who had come in to vote their stock cast their votes for Duke Tarrant. Some of their faces were a little red, but their voices came out clear and determined.

It came Francie's turn to vote. She stood up and her eyes raked the room, came to rest coldly on Diane. *There*, thought Diane, *was one bloc of stock Duke would never get. Not if he tripled the dividend!*

Francie drew a deep breath. "The Peltons have never backed a loser," she said sardonically. "I vote my 20,000 shares for Duke Tarrant."

Her scornful smile raked the man beside her. His face livid, Girondello rose and gave her a resounding slap across the face that knocked her sidewise to the floor, and charged down the aisle.

Duke was on his feet. "Stop that man," he ordered in a ringing voice. "Hold him for the police. He'll be charged with assault.

Two guards promptly pounced on Girondello, wrestled him to the red carpeting. Francie, a red mark across one side of her face, scrambled to her feet and turned to face Duke. It must have hurt her, but she smiled winsomely. And gave him a light-hearted salute.

If anything ever happens to me, thought Diane, *that woman will be right there to pick up the pieces!*

The voting continued, but the conclusion was no longer in doubt. Hadn't been since Garson Smelters cast his Southern proxies for Duke.

But even the rebel yell one exultant small stockholder (who always made the trek from Birmingham to these annual meetings) let out as he voted his shares for Duke could not obliterate the pictures that flashed through Diane's brain like a fast-shutter camera: Emmeline, grim and despairing, driving in her car (she drove herself in those days) up to Queenscourt, ostensibly to visit Lorna the "orphan," actually to see her own daughter and the lover of her autumn years. Along with that picture came one of Marnie MacQueen leaning against a door, breathless . . . and sinking to the floor to weep . . . and rising up, confused and full of hate, to find a pair of scissors and cut and slash, cut and slash . . . hating the child Lorna—and sometimes in her madness not even knowing why. A picture of Garnet rose up before her . . . red-haired, sexy Garnet, coarse and clever, talking to Marnie, piecing together her disjointed ramblings, separating truth from fantasy—and Trencherton Westcott across the hedge, listening. And then when Marnie died, Garnet *blackmailing* Ronald MacQueen into marrying her. She could almost see red-haired Garnet, with a face like Francie's, saying easily, "Of course, if you want the world to know about you and Emmeline and the patter of little feet, I could always give the story to the newspapers. . . ." And Ronald, tight-lipped, agreeing to anything rather than to see Emmeline and Lorna smeared, agreeing to marry Garnet. And Garnet, who'd already lost one rich husband in a nasty headline-grabbing divorce suit, comfily snuggling down in Queenscourt, back in the lap of luxury—contemptuous of Ronald, contemptuous of his daughter Lorna . . . and showing it, digging in her claws. She could see Ronald MacQueen, who had spent his life torn between women, growing more and more remote.

The voting went on, it was an avalanche, a landslide in favor of Duke, but still Diane hardly heard it. She was seeing flashes of other people, other times . . . the young Lorna, hurt and rebuffed, standing up to it, but something inside tearing, twisting so that she could not give love, only take. Saw that young Lorna using her beauty, her reckless charm to hurt men, to destroy them if she could. Keeping a list of potential victims. Saw her taking Duke because Francie wanted him,

taking Cole because Ginny wanted him, trying for Ben because Hilde wanted him . . . A cold and beautiful Lorna trying in her elemental way only to hurt, to strike back at a world that, she felt, had given her everything but love.

But Lorna . . . was not really a killer. She used her beauty, her charm, her brain to take revenge, but she wanted to destroy only the heart and let the body keep on walking so she could better and longer savor her revenge. So there was something wrong with the picture of Lorna savagely running down Garnet with her car and then flinging herself in tears into Cole's arms and running back to the house for an alibi. Something wrong there . . . Cole's voice had rung with sincerity when he'd said, *Those weren't tears of grief, they were tears of rage.* Certainly they'd have been tears of frustration. But then who—?

The Chairman's gavel banged down. His voice had caught up the excitement of the moment, pulsed with it. ". . . the incoming President of Tarrant Steel—your choice and mine—is once again *Duke Tarrant!*"

Pandemonium broke loose. Amid wild applause, he handed the gavel to Duke. Smiling, Duke took the gavel, stood before them on the podium looking as she had first seen him that day on the Queen's Staircase, invincible. Diane's heart was bursting with pride.

"Thank you all," he said, when the applause quieted enough for him to be heard. "I would like to nominate for Vice President—if Robert's Rules will allow me—a man who is fighting for his life today, but whose loyalty to this company has never wavered—John Cobham."

Cobbie! Tears stung her eyes. She found herself leaping to her feet too as someone—she thought it was Archer—cried, "How about a vote by acclamation?" And found herself joining in the wild roar of "ayes" that resounded through the big ballroom.

"Let me remind you there will be a meeting of the Board of Directors in the Palladian Room of this hotel at one o'clock," said Duke. "Meeting adjourned!" And banged the gavel down.

On both sides of him men sprang forward to shake his hand, to thump him on the back. Beside Diane someone knocked over a chair in the rush to get there faster. People surged past her, they shook her hand, they wrung Duke's,

they laughed and exulted and shouted happily. Diane had to fight her way through a crowd of well wishers.

Hilde kissed her impulsively. Ben wrung Duke's hand. Archer and Frieda came up, looking embarrassed. Duke slapped Archer on the back. "You won't have to wait for that vice presidency now," he said heartily, and joy washed over Frieda's face as Archer straightened up to his full height. *They'll always be loyal to Duke now*, Diane thought proudly, letting the crowd sweep her through the lobby amid exploding flash bulbs until they were standing outside on the hotel's broad concrete steps with the luncheon crowd thronging the sidewalk.

Turning, she came face to face with Emmeline Franklyn, looking cold and autocratic, leaning on her silver-headed cane, with Barnaby hovering protectively behind her.

"Thank you for supporting Duke," she said simply.

"I did you and Duke a great injustice," said Emmeline in a quiet voice. "I wanted to atone for it."

And Diane felt that in a way she had been given the keys to Queenscourt once again. By someone who had held them in trust for another.

"Perhaps you'd like to have Lorna's things," she said impulsively. "The attic is piled with them." Emmeline looked startled and Diane faltered, "I mean, of course, for charity."

Grateful tears glistened in the older woman's eyes. "You're very kind," she said huskily, and pressed Diane's hand. *She knows I know*, thought Diane. And Emmeline's next words confirmed it.

"Do you think Lorna . . . knows?" Emmeline almost whispered the words. "Do you think she knows at last? And forgives me?"

"Of course, she's forgiven you," said Diane compassionately. "What harm did you actually do her?"

"I let her grow up in a house with a woman who hated her," said Emmeline grimly. "I did that to her."

Out of the crowd swirling by on the sidewalk, a thin wild-eyed woman with faded yellow hair suddenly detached herself. She was wearing a cheap cotton dress and carrying a cheap plastic purse. Jumping up on the steps, she pulled a gun out of that purse and brandished it with a shaking hand at the paralyzed group clustered on the steps above her.

"You done it!" she cried in a shrill heartbroken voice. "You killed my Mattie Sue!"

That wavering muzzle was trained at Duke, but Diane was standing directly in front of him.

Simultaneously—although later Diane seemed to see it in slow motion—Duke thrust Diane behind him, a passerby grabbed the wild-eyed woman's arm, and Barnaby, Emmeline Franklyn's gray-haired chauffeur, his eyes flashing, sprang in front of Emmeline—and fell, as the bobbing gun spoke, blood gushing from his throat.

"Oh, my God!" screamed the woman in the cotton dress. She tore free and before anyone could stop her, put the gun to her own temple and fired, slumping to the pavement.

People came from everywhere. They were jostled, shoved. But in their own shaken group around Barnaby, Diane saw the chauffeur's lips move. He looked up and his dying eyes riveted on Emmeline Franklyn's white face above him. "I—killed her," he gasped out. "I—" his voice ended in a gurgle.

"Oh, Barnaby!" Emmeline's voice broke and she sank down by him, weeping. Diane was pushed aside by a doctor who bent over the old chauffeur, finally straightened up and said, "He's gone."

From somewhere behind them an awed voice said, "He done it, he killed Mattie Sue—he confessed. And Mattie Sue's mother musta knowed it."

Over the chauffeur's still form, Diane met Emmeline Franklyn's pain-filled eyes and it seemed to her they mirrored an older hell. Looking into that ravaged face, her own eyes filled with comprehension. Barnaby had confessed to murder, but it was to another and older murder long ago on Trowbridge Road: the hit and run death of Garnet MacQueen. A murder not he but Emmeline Franklyn had committed. Barnaby had lied like a gentleman to save his lady, in whose service he had lived . . . and died.

Here at last was the missing piece to the puzzle. How Emmeline must have hated Garnet! Marnie she had wronged, but Garnet had wronged *her*. If Garnet had gone away after Marnie died, Emmeline could have continued the farce of her visits to the "orphans," including Ginny in her itinerary as a smoke screen so that she could visit Lorna—that daughter of the heart that she could never claim. But Garnet had blackmailed Ronald MacQueen into marrying her *and then or-*

dered Emmeline out of the house. Diane could picture Emmeline stumbling through the front door, sick with rage, could see that rage washing over her afresh on that other day when through her car windshield she saw Garnet loom up as she strolled around the bad turn on Trowbridge Road. She could see Emmeline's foot go down hard on the accelerator, see Garnet's sudden look of terror as she saw death leap to meet her, hear Emmeline's harsh laughter as she gripped the wheel to take the shock as the car struck Garnet, could hear Garnet's scream as the tires ran over her. Could see Emmeline, white-faced at what she had done in her blind rage, careening down Trowbridge Road, with Ginny watching from the bushes—and putting the wrong construction on it, believing that Lorna had done it and Emmeline could not face the thought that one of her spotless "orphans" had sinned.

And with eyes now tear-wet she could see Barnaby, who had worshipped Emmeline, who had slept before her door to protect her from her sadistic husband, listening outside the library door as Emmeline panted out to Latham what she had done . . . and why. She could see Latham's face whiten, convulse with rage, could see him pick up a paperweight and suddenly stiffen and fall to the floor. Could see Barnaby come rushing in, see his eyes meet Emmeline's, see the bond forged that would hold them together for always. Could see Barnaby carry out Latham's body, see Emmeline in her role of loyal wife accompanying him to the hospital when all the time her heart was back at Queenscourt. . . .

She could see Ronald MacQueen, worn out at last by this turmoil he had helped create, bitterly believing Cammie had lied when she said she had waked Lorna to tell her of Garnet's death, could picture his despair as he envisioned Lorna—and through her Emmeline—trapped and held up to public scorn. He could not face it, but he hoped if he blew out his brains *that others would say he did it, that he had killed his wife and couldn't live with his guilt*—exactly what Kitty thought—and in that way he could make one last try to save Lorna and Emmeline.

She could see Emmeline turning white when she heard the news that Ronald MacQueen had taken his own life, could see her swaying against Barnaby, who held her with the sad knowledge that this was all he could ever be to her, a

friend—a kind, considerate friend who must hide the embers of his love lest they flare up and wreck the little part of her life that he might have. Poor Barnaby, born—like Emmeline—to love and lose.

She could see Emmeline's implacable face as she played nurse to Latham Franklyn, perhaps paying him back for his mistreatment of her, an Emmeline growing colder and harder with the years, taking nourishment from the times she was able to see the daughter she could never claim. And then to believe Duke killed her! No wonder she had gone after him, hammer and tongs.

And now Barnaby, good loyal Barnaby trapped by his single-minded devotion, had done his last service for his lady. He had gasped out a confession to a murder he hadn't committed, which the world believed an accident . . . and the world would believe he'd confessed instead to another murder—that wasn't a murder at all but an accident.

And Cammie hadn't lied. But in her clumsy efforts to convince Ronald MacQueen that she had really waked Lorna that day, that Lorna couldn't be guilty, she had only succeeded in convincing him that Lorna had killed Garnet. And he had killed himself rather than face it.

But by this strange pattern of guilt and deception, Duke was saved, for who could now prove Barnaby had lied? And Ben would not have to come forward to save Duke, so Hilde could ride through life not knowing how closely she had skirted the precipice. . . .

Across the body of her fallen knight, Emmeline's tear-wet green eyes met Diane's and flashed a challenge. *Your enlightened self-interest will keep you silent*, that look said. And Diane knew it was true, for now she herself was woven inextricably into the tough fabric of this steel town's life, the very coat of mail it wore. She was party to its lusts and loves. Their secrets were her secrets, their future—hers.

Turning, her gaze met Duke's and her head lifted. The kindling light in those steely-blue eyes told her that she possessed more than the keys to Queenscourt, much more. She had the heart of the high-flying gyrfalcon who had taken shelter there. And with Ginny's flawless staff and loyal Cammie to lead them, she'd make a home for him there of which even a Steel Duke would be proud. She took his arm, her bright hair

blowing in the summer wind, confident for the first time that no one could take him from her, and together they walked away into the sunlight.

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